COPPER COINS
TONG QIAN KAN SHI 1
Mu Su Li

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1

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WRITTEN BY
木苏里
MU SU LI

ILLUSTRATED BY
PORRIDGE
& DALO

TRANSLATED BY
FAELICY

Seven Seas

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TRANSLATION: Faelicy
ADAPTATION: Neon Yang
LOGO DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COVER DESIGN & INTERIOR LAYOUT: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Amanda Eyer
PROOFREADER: Jack Hamm, Pengie
EDITOR: Nikita Greene
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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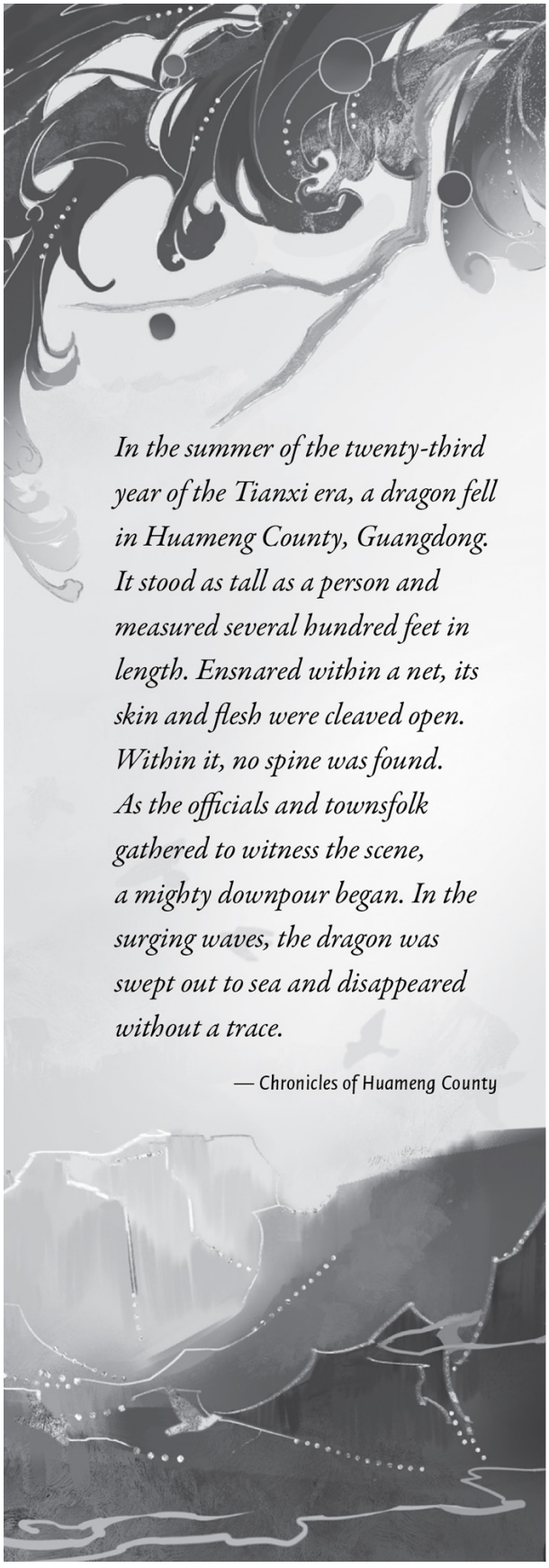
ARC 1

SEEKING



In the summer of the twenty-third year of the Tianxi era, a dragon fell in Huameng County, Guangdong. It stood as tall as a person and measured several hundred feet in length. Ensnared within a net, its skin and flesh were cleaved open. Within it, no spine was found. As the officials and townsfolk gathered to witness the scene, a mighty downpour began. In the surging waves, the dragon was swept out to sea and disappeared without a trace.

— Chronicles of Huameng County

Chapter 1:
The Ghostly Scholar

DURING A WINTER MONTH that same year in Ningyang County, Huizhou Prefecture, a gong rang, heralding that dawn was near. The sky was still dark, but faint murmurs of activity were already drifting through Xingtang Street. A waiter from Jiuwei House carried out several large steamers of fresh buns to set up a breakfast stall in front of the building.

The night watchman jogged over, his head tucked against the cold as he rubbed his hands together. He bought three buns, wolfed one down in a few bites, and gulped before he winked at the waiter. “Hey! Did you prepare the order we talked about?”

“We did. It’s right here.” The waiter frowned as he patted the takeout box beside the steamers.

The night watchman was astonished. “You really did? What if he… *that thing* doesn’t show up today?”

“Oh, ancestors above, please don’t let him come,” the waiter said with a shudder.

Jiuwei House was a moderately famous eatery in Ningyang County with a head chef known as “Three-Specialties Liu.” His reputation and livelihood rested on his three signature dishes: peach-braised pork belly, clay-pot roast pheasant, and civet simmered with pears. The pork belly was skin-on and beautifully marbled; the pheasant, sourced from Lishan, was neither too fat nor too lean; and the civet could only be caught on days when fresh snow blanketed the ground.

Thanks to these dishes, Jiuwei House was always packed with customers. However, Three-Specialties Liu also loved to put on airs. He only cooked ten pots of each dish per day and not one more. Those who wished to enjoy his food had to rush to the restaurant early. Still, to order such a hearty meal at the crack of dawn? Anyone who would do that

couldn't be right in the head, and this mad fellow had already shown up two days in a row!

The first day, he'd appeared before the waiter and ordered the three dishes. After that, he fell silent, wasting not a single breath more—literally not a single breath. It was the dead of winter; whenever people opened their mouths, streams of white vapor poured forth. But the air before this man remained clear, devoid of the slightest hint of mist.

The next day, his demands increased. He wanted the clay-pot roast pheasant without the star anise and fennel, and also not served in a clay pot. Then he ordered the dish of civet and pears without the pears. These demands didn't sound like the requests of someone who'd come to genuinely enjoy the food. If anything, they seemed more like an attempt to ruin the restaurant's reputation.

However, the waiter hadn't thrown out the malicious customer. Instead, he'd faithfully and fearfully served him for two days. Today, he'd even prepared the takeout box in advance. He glanced at the sky, his legs quivering like a knock-kneed chicken's.

"It's almost time for him to arrive. Wh-why aren't *you* shaking?" he asked, craning his neck toward the watchman.

"I patrol the streets every night. Why would I be shaking?" The watchman dropped his voice. "Besides, it's been an unsettling year. A couple of ghostly encounters is no big deal. Did you hear about that incident in June where they sighted a real dragon in Guangdong? It was lying on the shore. They said someone had ripped out its bones! The dragon's *bones*! You tell me, what kind of omen is that? And just a few months ago, they said the state preceptor almost perished—"

The watchman was still speaking when the waiter weakly slid downward, practically vanishing beneath the stall. "He's here, he's here… H-h-he really came…"

A scholarly-looking man appeared in front of the stall. His appearance was unremarkable, but he wore an expression of deep fatigue. The skin of his cheeks also bore an unusual flush, as if they had been warmed for too long by a flame. He was wearing an ash-blue robe, and both

the man and the clothes were thin and ephemeral, like a branch draped with fabric, ready to be swept away by the wind at any moment.

By the glow of his white paper lantern, the watchman stared at the scholar's face for a long time. So long, in fact, that the last bite of his bun grew cold in his mouth. The thought of swallowing had completely fled his mind.

"I'm here," muttered the scholar to himself. Then, he slowly raised his head. His midnight-black eyes stared, unblinking, at the waiter.

The stricken waiter squeezed his legs together, on the verge of wetting himself in terror.

"Excuse me, I'd like the peach-braised pork belly."

Now that he was speaking properly, the scholar's voice was surprisingly pleasant, refreshing as green bamboo or a burbling stream—a far cry from his earlier mumbling. However, the sound matched neither his face nor the movements of his mouth.

Seeing this, the waiter grew even more terrified. He avoided the scholar's gaze, picked up the takeout box with quivering hands, and shoved it at him. "I-it's all here. In a porcelain jar, and there's no lard, star anise, or fennel. Fresh from the pot, still steaming."

The scholar seemed to choke. He stared at the box for a moment before he slowly nodded and said, "Thank you." His voice bore a faint hoarseness this time.

When he took it, the takeout box seemed a bit heavy in the scholar's hands; it was as if a thousand-pound weight had been piled onto a branch. He left, walking much more slowly than when he'd arrived. After a very long time, his figure faded into the distance.

Returning to his senses, the watchman shivered.

The waiter's face was ashen as he whispered, "You saw him, right? His face—Hey, where are you rushing off to?"

"Toilet!" said the watchman.

The waiter watched the watchman go in silence, but he didn't get very far before he came running back, still holding his copper gong.

Before the waiter could speak, the watchman patted him on the shoulder, then winked at a spot not too far away. "Look over there!"

Across the street, a whisper-silent white silhouette materialized out of the night.

The waiter had just gone through a scare. When he thought he was seeing yet another malevolent entity, his legs almost buckled. Fortunately, upon giving the newcomer a proper look, the waiter realized he was a monk dressed in a thin acolyte's robe that was white with wide sleeves. From head to toe, his clothes carried not a hint of color, as though he were a man in mourning—an ominous sight so early in the morning.

The waiter was perplexed. "I see him. So? It's just a monk."

"When I passed by him earlier, I glanced at his waist," the watchman whispered. "He's got Wudi coins on him!"

Wudi coins were capable of warding off evil spirits and safeguarding one's home. It was said that the current state preceptor liked utilizing them and always carried a string of coins at his waist. Since then, these coins had become a staple of those in the business of dealing with the supernatural. While quite a few con artists walked among them, most who owned Wudi coins were the genuine article and knew a trick or two.

The waiter scrutinized the monk from afar. There seemed to be an indescribable aura about him, like he couldn't be a con artist. Besides, the waiter hadn't the luxury to worry about that. He'd hit his limit after three days. If the scholar came back tomorrow, he really might not be able to stop himself from losing control of his bladder.

Thanks to the monk's leisurely pace, he quickly closed the distance between them. As he was about to pass the stall, the waiter hurriedly called out to him. "Master, please wait!"

The monk paused, the hem of his white robe swaying gently, picking up nary a speck of dust. He glanced at the waiter, his gaze tranquil but devoid of warmth, colder than the winter wind blowing on the latter's face.

At these close quarters, the waiter became aware of how tall the monk was. He gazed down upon the waiter, who found himself taking a half step back —where he bumped into the watchman behind him who was doing the same.

This collision brought his courage back from where it'd been cowering. Throwing caution to the wind, the waiter spoke again. "I noticed that you're carrying Wudi coins, Master. Do you know anything about exorcising evil spirits?"

Expressionlessly, the monk swept his eyes down toward the copper coins at his waist, neither confirming nor denying that he did.

The waiter exchanged an awkward glance with the watchman. This monk's demeanor was colder than an artic blast, freezing him until he couldn't even think straight, let alone speak.

Fortunately, the watchman was more resilient and spoke up for him. He succinctly described their scholarly-looking customer, then said to the monk, "We can't claim to know him exactly, but that face is unmistakable all the same. He's the son of the Jiang family, but…the Jiang family clinic caught fire three years ago. Other than their daughter who'd been married off to Anqing, everyone perished in the flames! As the saying goes, 'even ghosts have time on their hands right before sunrise.' A dead man has appeared three days in a row, always right before sunrise, during the witching hour! It's natural to be terrified!"

The monk scanned the sky and finally said something, though it was clipped and cold. "Where is he?"

At those words, the waiter thawed and sprang back to life. He pointed to where the wall curved away in the distance and sputtered, "He just left! He might not have gone inside yet! I know where the Jiang family's ruined clinic is. M-Master, I can take you there!"

Almost as soon as the waiter had offered to the go with the monk, he'd regretted his words and had wanted to slap himself. Why didn't he think before speaking? Who would want to accompany a walking ice statue in the dead of winter? Had he gone mad?

They'd only walked through a couple of alleys, and the waiter felt like he'd walked half his life away. From time to time, he stole glances at the young monk. He tried and failed several times to muster the courage to ask the man any questions. All the waiter had learned about the monk since meeting him was that he had a small mole at the base of his neck.

Before the waiter could freeze to death, they finally arrived at the street corner where the Jiang family clinic was located. As the waiter had suspected, that frail-looking scholar hadn't yet gone inside. He was making his way down the alley with aching slowness, box of food in hand. Bizarrely, he was muttering to himself as he walked, his voice at times clear and pleasant, at times low and hoarse.

"Did you personally go to Lishan to catch the pheasant for me or what? With how slowly you're walking, will you even make it back before the new year?" the clear voice asked.

"Better than not being able to walk at all," replied the hoarse one.

"Looks to me like you have a death wish."

"Well, my humble self has been dead for just over three years."

The scholar was playing the role of two characters—or a vivid portrayal of a man who was seriously not right in the head. Then, like a slip of paper, he slid through the crumbling wall of the Jiang residence.

Hidden behind the alley wall, the waiter witnessed all this and was so spooked he almost turned tail and ran. In fact, he had one foot raised to go when he remembered the ice statue of a monk still standing beside him. In his panic, he pulled out a purse full of money and shoved it into the monk's arms.

"A token of my appreciation," the waiter muttered before fleeing. He was practically out of sight within seconds.

The monk frowned and glanced down at the purse in his hand. It'd clearly been a long time since it was last washed. He could no longer tell its original color, and the scent of rancid oil hung around it.

He raised his hand as if to toss this filthy object away, but as the string was about to slip from his hand, he hooked it back with a finger.

Then, still wearing an expression of moderate disdain, he made his way to the entrance of the Jiang family clinic, purse in hand.

The waiter had rushed back to Jiuwei House and was now leaning against the wall, gasping for breath. It was a long time before he could tell the watchman what had happened—gesticulating the whole while.

When he was done, he pondered for a moment, then hissed softly, "I've suddenly realized the master looked a bit familiar."

"You sit at this stall all day, watching people from all over come and go," said the watchman, annoyed. "Everyone looks familiar to you."

Having caught his breath, the waiter straightened up and swept his gaze over the stretch of wall he'd been leaning against. Abruptly, he went stiff.

A wanted poster had been hung on the wall half a month ago. Unfortunately, heavy snow had fallen right after its posting, drenching and freezing it. By the second day, the poster had become mottled and wet, its original image indiscernible. Even the waiter had only caught a brief glimpse of the poster despite always setting out early, so his impression of it was vague.

Now, most of the poster had peeled away, leaving only the bottom half with the subject's neck. There, a tiny mole could be faintly seen—identical to the one on the monk's neck.

The waiter jolted in shock. That man was a wanted criminal with a hefty bounty on his head!

Chapter 2:
Paper Doll

THE JIANG FAMILY CLINIC was in Yanchao Alley. Most of the wooden buildings had burned to ashes in the fire three years ago. Only the westernmost wing remained, offering meager shelter from the wind and rain. It wasn't fit for people to live in, but ghosts had no problem lurking there.

The son of the Jiang family, not yet twenty years old when he died, was now a ghost wandering his own family compound. After slipping into the courtyard through a crack in the wall, he loitered for a moment, though his mouth quickly went to work.

"Is there an ocean between the front gates and west wing or what?" That clear voice couldn't keep quiet any longer.

Jiang Shining raised his sickly face to the sky. For a moment he was silent, before he continued in a low, hoarse voice, "I'm inside the compound, but the box of food is stuck outside the wall."

He scoffed, then muttered to himself, "Amazing."

"You flatter me."

Jiang Shining went quiet. Beneath the moonlight, his expression turned livid, and it seemed he was unwilling to speak further.

The three walls of the dilapidated room had been blackened by smoke, and the window facing north was nothing more than a yawning hole. As it was the early hours of the morning in winter, dawn's light was nowhere to be seen. The sky only held a smudge of the crescent moon, its light filtering in to illuminate a corner of the room. The man sitting by the ruins of the window was half cast in cold moonlight, while his other half remained shrouded in darkness. His black clothes melded into the night. Beneath his straight, beautiful brow pooled two shadows, and the pitch-black irises within reflected a faint glimmer. Even from his silhouette, it

was clear he possessed a striking appearance. However, the half of his face illuminated by moonlight was unnaturally pale, and the harsh bony jut of the wrist supporting his chin spoke of a long sickness.

In truth, he really was ill. He could neither stand nor walk. As for *why*? Even a ghost wouldn't know. He'd been staying in the Jiang residence for four days, but Jiang Shining knew nothing about him, beyond that his name was Xue Xian.

"Please improve your terrible sitting posture," Jiang Shining pleaded. He'd pressed the overflowing box of food into Xue Xian's hands right after entering the room. "If you keep slouching to the side, your upper body might become paralyzed too." While alive, he'd spent well over a dozen years reading the classics, and Xue Xian's indolent posture made his eyes ache.

As Jiang Shining turned away, unable to bear the sight any longer, he found his mouth moving as that clear voice rang out of his lips. "Slouching a little will paralyze me? Do you think I'm like you?"

Jiang Shining was thoroughly unhappy now, and he gazed at Xue Xian with a face full of despair. "I'm already here, Wise One. Use your own mouth to speak, won't you?"

Xue Xian pried open the lid of the box, squinting as he sniffed at it, inhaling the aroma of hot food. Finally, he spoke with his own mouth. "All right. Since you've brought me meat, I'll suffer this hardship for your sake. Want a piece?"

“Are you going to burn it into ash for me?” asked Jiang Shining glumly.

“In your dreams.”

“Just eat your food!”

Jiang Shining no longer wanted to speak to Xue Xian. He walked to a corner, then suddenly collapsed, transforming into a flimsy paper doll and sliding from the wall to the ground. He only had a limited amount of time he could manifest each day; once that was up, he had to rest.

The paper doll was *truly* the work of a “genius.” Its edges looked like they’d been chewed on by a dog, while a few brush strokes formed the scribble of a face. If one squinted, they could just make out Jiang Shining’s likeness. Upon its cheeks were two blobs of rouge, adding a touch of silliness to its uncanniness.

The paper doll had barely spent a second on the ground before Xue Xian’s continued offenses to his sensibilities got to him. Jiang Shining rose once more and frowned. “I’ve been wanting to say this for days. Can’t you even hold your chopsticks correctly?”

Xue Xian lazily flicked his gaze upward. “As you pointed out so *kindly*, my upper body was paralyzed for a long time. Only recently have I been able to sit up, so I can’t quite use chopsticks properly yet.” Then he raised his hand and flipped something at Jiang Shining, hitting him squarely on the forehead and sending him crashing back to the floor as a paper doll. Xue Xian had made his annoyance clear.

With some effort, Jiang Shining twisted his head to look at what had been flung at him.

Wonderful, a chicken bone! he thought.

He was quiet for a moment before he recalled something. Struggling to get up again, he said, “There’s one more thing. Can you not smear rouge on my face tomorrow?”

This time, Xue Xian’s answer was even more lackadaisical. He only said one word: “No.”

Jiang Shining couldn't bring himself to say anything to that. One shouldn't bite the hand that fed them, he understood. If Xue Xian hadn't crafted this paper body for him, who knew how long he would have drifted as lonely as a cloud.

Still, there was one thing Jiang Shining couldn't understand. Huizhou was huge, with no lack of vacant houses. Any of them could temporarily shelter Xue Xian, yet he'd specifically chosen the Jiang family's burned-out clinic. Was there something wrong with him? Moreover, the day he arrived, Xue Xian mentioned that he was here for something important. But four days had passed, and the only thing he'd done (aside from eating) was craft a paper doll for Jiang Shining to possess. Surely, his important task wasn't to cut out a paper doll?

Jiang Shining lay on the cold ground for a while longer before he remembered something else and struggled to rise once more.

With his ill temper, Xue Xian was already irritated by their brief conversation, and he spoke before Jiang Shining could. "Keep talking and I'll snip your mouth off. You can talk tomorrow morning."

"Just one last thing!" Jiang Shining rushed to say.

Xue Xian shot him a glare. "Listening to you gives me a headache. That's what will end up paralyzing me. Shut up."

"I think someone followed me here," said Jiang Shining. "I glanced back when I stepped into the courtyard earlier and thought I saw a monk with a string of copper coins at his waist. I reckon that he should be at the door by now."

After saying so, he collapsed and fell silent, his time up for the day. He could no longer move or speak until nightfall, only watching from the sidelines at most.

Xue Xian was speechless. *What* would a monk follow a ghost for? A monk with a string of copper coins hanging from his waist, following a ghost. Something so important and the damn bookworm hadn't told him earlier, when it *mattered*? Was he planning to save it for New Year's Day?!

Fury bubbled inside Xue Xian. If he'd still been able-bodied, he would have blasted Jiang Shining and the entire courtyard to smithereens. Now, however, he could only maintain a blank expression, watching through the ruined window as the courtyard gates, pushed from outside, creaked open.

In these times, there were plenty of charlatans who made a living spinning lies. Xue Xian had met quite a few himself, but he also knew that a couple among them really knew their stuff. How capable one was depended on one's experience. The older one grew, the harder one became to fool.

The monk stepped inside, and Xue Xian breathed a small sigh of relief. The interloper was surprisingly young. He clearly wasn't a con artist, but he was nothing special—the copper coins at his waist were the evidence. The more skilled the exorcist, the more evil spirits they would have subdued with their coins. As if coated in oil, those coins would have a sheen to them when seen from afar. Some might employ trickery to mimic this sheen, but while that might be enough to fool an ordinary person, it would be useless against Xue Xian.

For this young monk, however, it seemed like trickery hadn't even crossed his mind. The coins hanging at his waist were shine-free; their copper coating had nearly worn away, leaving them dull and gray. It was hard to say where he had come across them—perhaps they'd never even been put to use. Yet he'd still left his mountain to sell his services. With what advertisement? His face?

Xue Xian sneered privately. He put down his box of food and cast a basic illusion, turning it into a charred wooden post. Then, he silently leaned back in his chair and his tall, slender form flattened into a slip of paper, its edges much neater than Jiang Shining's and its brushstrokes more refined. There were also no blobs of rouge on its face.

Jiang Shining lay mute and motionless on the ground. The lack of rouge on Xue Xian's cheeks told Jiang Shining that his companion had been born in the year of the donkey: a purebred ass, through and through.

The flimsy paper Xue Xian was inhabiting fluttered from the chair to the floor, landing next to Jiang Shining. In the blink of an eye, Xue Xian

cast another illusion, and the two paper dolls became a clump of moss on the muddy ground, blending in with the dilapidated house. It was a flawless disguise.

A mere half year ago, Xue Xian would not have bothered with this deception. Those with the guts to barge into his nest would have found themselves buried six feet under. Now, he had no choice but to debase himself by casting illusion after illusion. After all, he had only just begun to recover from complete, then partial paralysis. Any movement was a monumental challenge for his frail body, and it was severely restricted in the magic it could channel. That he'd avoided sending himself to his grave was already a blessing.

Fortunately, their current monkish visitor was no better than a decorative flowerpot—only his appearance was worth anything. He would probably take a look around after entering, find no one, and leave.

The young monk in the white hemp robe paused in the courtyard and swept a cold gaze over the area.

The Jiang family's clinic originally had three main houses, three side wings, and a medicinal herb garden, with a large storefront behind the latter. It'd been a sizable compound, but it had lain completely abandoned for three years after the devastating fire. Now, one could take in all that remained in a mere few glances.

The monk lowered his eyes and carefully stepped over the shattered stones and tiles on the ground, making his way toward that remaining half of a side wing. As he stepped forward, his fingers, concealed within his sleeves, absentmindedly brushed against the coins at his waist. A moment later, frowning, he let them go.

Stuck as a clump of moss, Jiang Shining stared at the monk's shoes, afraid the monk might accidentally tread on Jiang Shining's paper body as he moved about. In contrast, Xue Xian remained at ease, perceiving the monk as no threat whatsoever.

As expected, the side wing was so small, one could scan its contents with one look. In fact, the monk didn't even step inside. He merely paused

at the doorway for a moment before turning to leave.

Xue Xian couldn't help silently sneering once more—but he found his mirth cut short when the monk came back. This time, he held a piece of white hemp cloth in his hand. Judging from its size, the scrap had probably been torn from his robe. He used the clean fabric to hold a piece of copper he had discovered in the courtyard. With a cold expression, he approached Xue Xian, squatted with a rustle of his robe, and scooped Moss Xue right off the ground.

Xue Xian remained furiously silent. While scooping him up, the monk had wrinkled his brow for a brief moment. If Xue Xian wasn't mistaken, it was a look of disgust.

This bald donkey bastard thinks I'm *dirty! Me?!*

Xue Xian, who'd once prided himself on—as it was said—being able to pierce the heavens above and shake the earth below, now found himself at the mercy of a monk who possessed nothing beyond his good looks. And the act had cost the monk only a scrap of worn copper…

After being scooped up, the two clumps of moss quickly revealed their true forms, transforming into two small humanoid figures made of paper. The monk cast a cursory glance at the faces of the paper figures, then folded them up and tucked them inside a hidden pouch at his waist.

Xue Xian's heart raged like a tsunami, but before he could unleash his fury on this bald donkey, he found himself pressed flat against the monk's side, not a sliver of space separating them.

If pure frustration could kill a man, Xue Xian would have perished more than two hundred times in the time it took for him to be shoved into the pouch. With his arrogant nature, he liked humiliating others but could not accept others doing the same to him. This wise one was brazen and unreasonable, and this time, he'd carelessly struck his foot against a pebble and stubbed his toe. He was hopping mad. The inciting incident no longer mattered: From this point forward, the insolent monk was his nemesis.

Xue Xian was the type who refused to bend. He could be persuaded into things, but never forced into action. If he had a knife in his hand, he

would have plunged it right into the monk's lower back without a second thought. Unfortunately, he never carried weapons.

Though this monk was the perfect image of a frozen statue, emotionless and unresponsive, his body was still warm to the touch. Faint body heat suffused through the thin white hemp of his clothing, permeating the paper doll bit by bit. In no time at all, Paper Xue found himself thoroughly warmed.

Damn it!

It was truly vexing. For someone in poor health, a touch of warmth on a cold winter day could easily undermine their fighting spirit—especially for Xue Xian, who had been paralyzed for six months. His meridians were blocked and his circulation poor. His body struggled to retain warmth; he'd practically been frozen all winter. As the heat enveloped him, his body disobeyed his mind, and a sense of lethargy washed over him, leaving him reluctant to move.

Folded in half, Xue Xian lay there like a paper craft for a moment before he shook off his body's indolence and quietly began to explore the pouch.

He still did not know what to make of this young monk. If he was truly the real deal, what kind of exorcist would tear his robe to pick up some moss? Even a toddler who only knew how to make messes could manage that without using a cloth. Those truly capable could raise a patch of ground with the twitch of a finger. In fact, if they wanted to, they could uproot the entire courtyard! Why would they need to grab some copper scraps to pick up a bit of dirt?

But if this monk *wasn't* the real deal, how had he seen through the web of Xue Xian's illusions so quickly?

At first, Xue Xian moved cautiously, careful not to make any noise. Using the thinness of his paper body, he navigated the space undetected. However, his caution soon dissipated because, before long, the monk stopped having the luxury to pay attention to him. A jumble of voices from beyond the courtyard filtered in through the white hemp fabric and the

pouch. It seemed like a crowd had gathered, though Xue Xian didn't know why.

"Hey, why are you hitting my face?!" Jiang Shining's voice was low, his words uttered through clenched teeth. It sounded like he'd reached the end of his patience with Xue Xian after the latter had accidentally patted the wrong thing in his exploration of the pouch. Xue Xian had neither the time nor the mood to explain himself to Jiang Shining, so he hushed him, warning the bookworm not to make any noise.

In the past half year, Xue Xian's movements had been terribly restricted. Any time he wished to do something or go somewhere, he was forced to wait for a lucky break. This time, he'd been fortunate enough to come across a charlatan monk. Even if he was a fraud, he was sure to have a tool or two that he'd use for tricking others. Xue Xian hoped to snatch a useful item from the pouch before escaping amid the chaos.

While Xue Xian was occupied, the young monk who'd seized him made his way to the entrance of the Jiang family clinic. The once-sturdy gates were no longer whole, their copper fittings warped and misshapen. The double doors failed to close properly, leaving a sizeable gap where they met.

Pausing by the entrance, the monk gazed ahead. Through that space between the doors, reminiscent of a toothy grin, he could clearly make out the silhouettes of people outside. With the clinic long reduced to ruins, there were no lanterns hanging at the entrance. Even if there had been, there was no one left to light them. Instead, the group of men past the door were holding a string of paper lanterns, the hazy white glow casting an air of menacing severity over them. It was clear they weren't there for a friendly visit; they'd either come to hunt ghosts or to seize someone.

Most people would feel a sense of apprehension when confronted with an oppressive sight like this. But the young monk only shot them a glance before looking away. He pushed open the courtyard door, ignoring the newcomers, and stepped forward to leave as if they weren't there at all.

The crowd gathered at the entrance of the Jiang family clinic wasn't just any group. They numbered around ten, each dressed in the county

office's smoke-blue uniform and carrying a slender, two-foot-long saber at their waist. Seeing that the monk was preparing to depart, they swiftly gripped their sabers, encircling him and cutting off his escape route.

The monk stopped, frowning as he scanned the people in front of him, confused as to what they wanted from him.

"Is this the man you were talking about?" a mature voice boomed.

The monk's gaze shifted to the speaker: a short, middle-aged man, thin but with a protruding belly, wearing a scribe's hat and sporting a goatee. Any local from the area would immediately recognize this man as Liu Xue, the scribe of Ningyang's county office.

The monk was not a local. Besides, his temperament meant he'd never pay attention to what the scribe looked like—not even how many eyes or mouths he had.

However, the monk retained a vague impression of the man Scribe Liu was questioning: It was none other than the short waiter from Jiuwei House.

It turned out that, after studying the wanted poster by Jiuwei House, the waiter had decided to pay the county office a visit. With such a hefty bounty on his head, the monk had to be a dangerous criminal, perhaps even a serial killer. Upon receiving this report, the office immediately dispatched men to arrest him.

The monk's gaze fell on the waiter, who shrank back a little out of guilt. "M-Master," he stammered.

The young monk had already turned away before he could finish his sentence. He raised a finger, and a dark object soared through the air, landing squarely in the waiter's arms. Shocked, the waiter snapped his eyes shut, fearing it was a weapon of some sort. Then, he heard the sound of clinking coins and cautiously opened his eyes.

A purse! It was the same purse the waiter had shoved at the monk earlier, now tossed back to him.

It was as if the monk had discarded a burden. His expression calm, he stepped forward again. The group's obstruction seemed to have finally

registered to his nerves.

"Step aside," he said to the officers, his words clipped.

"My lord, this…" The county officer standing in the monk's way glanced at the scribe, pleading for guidance.

"Wait." The scribe pulled a thin piece of paper from his robe and spread it beneath the light of the lantern. "Where are you from, young shifu?[1] Which temple do you serve under? Do you have a Dharma name?"

The monk frowned at him. He seemed disinclined to answer, but it also seemed as though he was thinking something over.

At his impudence, the scribe's tone grew harsher. "Young shifu, someone reported you to us, saying you look like a criminal wanted by the court. If you refuse to speak, we'll need to bring you back for a thorough interrogation!"

The young monk stared at him coldly. "My Dharma name is Xuanmin," he said after a moment. "A wandering monk with neither home nor temple."

A real monk would never respond in such a manner. Those who professed to have neither home nor temple were often little more than swindlers—con artists masquerading as experts in the supernatural. The scribe sized him up, a hint of ridicule in his gaze. He flipped the wanted poster he was holding and ordered for the lantern to be brought closer, then compared it with Xuanmin's face.

Concealed within Xuanmin's pouch, Xue Xian had heard everything and was overcome with schadenfreude. *Your fault for barging into someone's den. Now you're going to be arrested yourself? Serves you right!*

He had found nothing useful during his rummaging. Other than a peach twig and two pieces of flint, the pouch had only held a cloth bag. He'd meticulously felt around the bag's insides, which were filled with needles of various lengths, but nothing useful to him.

Xue Xian was in no mood to wait any longer. He hoped to slip out of the hidden pouch while the monk was distracted. He was sure he could do

it. As long as he wished to draw no attention, most people would be unable to detect any sounds or movements he made. Xue Xian waited until the scribe was about to speak again, then flattened himself into a single thin sheet and shimmied toward the pouch's sliver of an opening. But the moment he poked his head out, his vision went black.

That accursed bald donkey had the audacity to shove Xue Xian's head back into the pouch with his finger!

Xue Xian seethed. With his recalcitrant nature, he was sent into a rage by the gesture. In his fury, he flailed around in the pouch and grabbed one of the needles inside the cloth bag, which he then stabbed right into the monk's side.

Xuanmin kept his mouth firmly shut.

Just as Xue Xian was about to explode, the scribe finished his comparison. He frowned and shook his head. "That's not right…"

"Not right?" The officer behind him shot him a couple of quick looks.

"His age doesn't match up. There's too much of a difference," the scribe remarked. "His appearance isn't a good fit either. You might think so from a distance, but up close, in lantern light, it's clear he's just too young. The one we're trying to catch is said to be a dangerous high monk, but this shifu…"

The scribe swept his gaze toward Xuanmin's hip, his eyes flitting over the string of dull gray coins. Although he didn't voice it, his expression spoke volumes. This monk was clearly a novice; his coins hadn't even developed a sheen yet. A high monk? Ridiculous! No one would show any respect to a con artist as obvious as this one.

The scribe's expression grew even more disdainful. He raised a hand and waved at Xuanmin. "All right, we're done here. You can leave."

Xuanmin went to leave, treating the entire interlude like a leaf drifting down upon him—easily brushed aside and wholly irrelevant. However, after he'd taken a few steps outside, he coolly glanced at the scribe's face.

"You won't live long," he said.

Inside the hidden pouch, the thrashing Xue Xian had been in the middle of hatching a new plan. But when he heard this, he slipped and almost tore himself in half. Fantastic! He didn't even have to work for it—this idiot had just signed his own death warrant!

Unfortunately for Xue Xian, when he fell, he accidentally pressed against Xuanmin's lower spine. A droning noise abruptly sounded in his head, as if someone had rung a great bell inside his skull. The sudden blow left him stunned, and he sank back into the depths of the pouch.

For a moment, he was both confused and filled with disbelief. Then, he inched back within the hidden pouch, returning to the spot he'd just been in. He pressed himself against the rough white hemp and gave a listen, but this time nothing happened, even as he scoured the area.

"Could it be the effect of the needle?" Xue Xian muttered to himself, picking up the slender object once more.

"Argh, what just poked me?" Jiang Shining groused, his voice muffled. "What nonsense are you up to now?"

"Wait, how are you speaking again?" Xue Xian asked suddenly.

Jiang Shining froze. That was right; he'd used up all his time for today. He shouldn't have been able to move or speak. Did the change have something to do with that sound earlier? No, that couldn't be it. Jiang Shining had spoken before then, but the implications just hadn't occurred to him or Xue Xian.

Does he really have something valuable on him? Xue Xian wondered, growing even more curious. Without a second thought, he jabbed the needle into the acupoint on Xuanmin's back once more.

Xuanmin had been about to step out of the encirclement of officials but came to a halt.

Xue Xian was probably the first captive in history to act so brazenly after being caught—truly something else. Frowning, Xuanmin pinched the misbehaving paper doll and plucked it from his pouch.

The heavily creased Xue Xian had been left quite disheveled by his antics. At first glance, he was only the size of a folded letter, so the

onlookers saw nothing unusual about him.

Xuanmin unceremoniously gripped the paper figure's head, wanting to remove the silver needle stuck to it. However, the needle clung tight, as if it were part of the paper itself.

Xuanmin dropped his gaze. "Let go," he demanded of the paper.

The officers looked on in astonishment. Was this swindler monk ill? Or was he playing some kind of trick?

Scribe Liu finally snapped out of his shock at Xuanmin's words about his lifespan and became incensed. He pointed at Xuanmin and roared, "You insolent rogue! Even if you're not the criminal on the poster, with your dubious appearance and background, the law still permits me to arrest and interrogate you until you reveal everything about yourself! I was showing kindness by letting you go! It's one thing to show no gratitude, but to curse me?! Men—"

Before he could finish, Xuanmin interrupted him. "There's a shadow between your brows; it's black in the center and green along the edges, a sign that you've depleted the remaining years of your lifespan. Furthermore, there's a mark of blood on your left ear."

"What mark?" Scribe Liu reached up to scrub at his left ear but found no trace of red on his fingers.

"You can't see it." Xuanmin finally plucked the needle from the paper doll and placed it back in the pouch, then flicked at the figure with his finger, his gaze cool.

No one had ever *dared* flick Xue Xian, let alone a bald donkey so full of hot air that he might ascend to the heavens! But before Xue Xian could explode, the words "a mark of blood on your left ear" chilled him into stillness. Struggling, he twisted around in Xuanmin's fingers to look at Scribe Liu.

On Scribe Liu's left ear, near the temple, there was indeed a red mark, as if he had been splattered by some creature's blood.

When Xue Xian saw that, his flimsy paper body trembled, and the anger and hatred he'd suppressed for so long erupted like a tidal wave.

In a daze, he found himself back on that damp shore, dark clouds looming overhead, the smell of salt crashing upon him with each wave, and thunder rumbling as heavy rain poured down. Yet he couldn't move; his mind was trapped in fog, and his back was in agony, as if a thousand ants were gnawing at him. Someone had stripped him of his tendons and bones, but he hadn't even managed a clear look at the culprit's face…

While Xue Xian's mind was in turmoil, Scribe Liu was still rubbing at his ear, until he gave up and glared at Xuanmin.

"What do you mean I can't see it?! Everything you say is just lies and nonsense meant to hoodwink others. A shadow between my brows, an omen of impending death—that's stuff any swindler would say! What does a 'mark of blood' even mean?!"

Xue Xian stared hard at Scribe Liu. He may have been ignorant, but Xue Xian knew *exactly* what blood on the ear signified: A grudge holder had stained their target with blood, ensuring they'd recognize them when the time for revenge came. Earlier, he'd been so focused on fighting Xuanmin inside the pouch that he hadn't noticed it, but now that he'd calmed down, he detected a certain smell hanging around Scribe Liu. That was the scent from the mark, reminiscent of rust yet slightly different. It was a smell intensely familiar to Xue Xian, for it was his own blood.

Ever since he'd woken up, he'd been searching for the one who'd stripped him of his tendons and bones. He had no idea what they looked like nor who they were, so his search had been fruitless. The only clue he had was his own blood. Anyone splattered with his blood was someone who'd been on that shore at that time, on that day. They numbered about a hundred. He'd found a couple so far and had managed to glean a few details of what happened through his interrogations, but it wasn't enough. It was far from enough. Finding the culprits with those meager hints was like hunting for a needle in a haystack. So Xue Xian had spent the past six months journeying from Huameng to this place, seeking to uncover more clues and reveal his target for revenge.

The doll squirming in Xuanmin's fingers abruptly quieted down. Xuanmin thought he'd given in and stopped his pointless struggling, so he placed Xue Xian back inside the pouch while casting another glance at

Scribe Liu. “You were supposed to die today, but someone else took your place.” He looked away before remarking, “Believe it or not, it’s up to you.”

Without saying another word, he moved to leave.

However, someone he’d offended this much wouldn’t let him walk away so easily. Infuriated by all the talk of his death, Scribe Liu flew into a rage. On one hand, this wandering monk seemed no more than a blathering fraud, but on the other, the prospect of his own life being at risk disturbed Scribe Liu.

Most con artists loved this kind of trick. They started off warning their victims that disaster was coming to stir up their fears, then they’d put on a show of feigning indifference, acting aloof as they turned to leave. Some people would take the bait, thinking, *All right. Let’s treat it as insurance. What if they’re right?*

Scribe Liu warned himself not to fall for the ruse while barking orders at the officers. “Draw your blades and seize him!”

Daring to mess with the county office? This monk was asking for it! Just as the officers surged forth to grab at Xuanmin’s sleeves, a breathless voice came from afar.

“My lord! My lord, we have trouble!” Everyone turned around and saw a servant boy stumbling toward them. He skidded to a stop before Scribe Liu, panic written all over his face. “My lord! The young master… He’s fallen into the well!”

“What?!” Scribe Liu felt his legs tremble, and his scalp went numb. He glanced inadvertently at Xuanmin, still surrounded by the officers, his heart thumping. For a moment, he didn’t know what to do first: rush home or grab Xuanmin.

“My lord!” the servant cried again.

Scribe Liu shuddered and stepped forward, ready to follow the servant back. In a daze, he staggered forth on legs that didn’t feel like his own. He’d only run two steps when he turned sharply around.

“Let him go! Let him go, all of you!” Scribe Liu grabbed Xuanmin’s sleeve. “Y-you… No! You come with me!”

Xuanmin disdainfully shook off the man’s hand. He was about to say something when he felt his pouch move. The paper doll he’d just returned to the pouch seized its chance, tumbling out and latching onto Scribe Liu’s sleeve. Next, it darted over and clung to the servant’s collar, letting itself be carried away.

For his short stature, the servant boy was surprisingly fleet of foot, likely due to his youth. He seemed to bounce as he ran, brimming with restless energy. As he sprinted ahead, he glanced back every few steps to check on Scribe Liu and his surroundings, while remaining completely oblivious to the object clinging to the back of his neck.

In contrast to the spirited boy, Xue Xian’s limited mobility persisted; even as a paper doll, he remained a paraplegic. He clung to his new ride with just his hands, but his grip was viselike.

Chapter 3:
The Scribe's Residence

XUE XIAN'S FLIMSY PAPER BODY flapped wildly in the wind as his servant boy steed sprinted along. By the time they at last reached Scribe Liu's residence, Xue Xian had been bucked around to the point of nausea.

Ningyang County was a prosperous area, and Liu Xue enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle as its scribe. His residence was quite a bit larger than the Jiang family's ruined clinic. Its exterior was unremarkable, but the layout of its interior had been designed with meticulous care.

"Impressive." Xue Xian peeked over the servant's shoulder and scanned his surroundings, then heaved a sigh. "An impressive effort in digging your own grave, that is."

The servant, puzzled, stood at the threshold. He had a creeping feeling that someone was whispering behind him, almost right against his neck. His hair stood on end and a chill ran down his spine. "Wh-wh-who's speaking?"

"Guess," said Xue Xian, flippant.

The servant froze in horror.

Xue Xian was a real piece of work. He hadn't just treated the kid like a horse, he'd now driven him to tears as well. The boy was only twelve or thirteen, his courage no greater than a pinhead. Xue Xian's soft whispers sent a jolt of terror through him; he stopped waiting for his master and broke into a run. Wailing, he dashed straight to the guest hall, only to trip over the entrance and land flat on his face.

His impact upon the ground jolted Xue Xian, who lost his grip and fell from his collar, fluttering to the floor. Just as he was about to grab the boy's clothing again, the servant scrambled to his feet and darted away with rabbitlike speed.

This was what they called "suffering the consequences of your actions."

A crumpled piece of paper lay on the ground, unnoticed. At that moment, the guest hall was in chaos, filled with panicked cries and frantic footsteps as people of all ages surrounded a young boy and wept.

He was drenched, his hair disheveled and stuck to his face. Several locks had been pushed aside, revealing his ashen complexion, and his eyes were tightly shut. It seemed he'd drawn his last breath.

This was the harrowing scene that greeted Scribe Liu when he stumbled into the guest hall. His legs buckled. "Jin-er—"[2]

Still on the floor, Xue Xian sharply turned his gaze and saw an enormous wave of feet approaching him. In his alarm, all other thoughts fled his mind as he latched onto a blade of dried grass poking between the tiles and used it as leverage to pull himself away.

He'd barely moved an inch when fingers closed around his body and tried to pick him up.

"What bastard dares grab me? Let go!" Xue Xian cursed. When he turned his head and saw it was that accursed monk again, he almost passed out from rage.

Xue Xian had only come to the Liu residence to keep an eye on Scribe Liu so he could fish for a chance to interrogate him. Why had this stupid monk followed him? Hadn't he acted like it was none of his business earlier? Surely it wasn't just to capture Xue Xian again? The world was teeming with evil spirits. Why was Xuanmin so obsessed with him?!

Xue Xian mentally ran through a list of curses for Xuanmin. He'd had enough of him! Clutching at the blade of dry grass, he refused to let go. But, to his dismay, he was eventually plucked from the ground, blade of grass and all.

Xuanmin held his runaway captive in one hand, his pitch-black eyes flickering as he stared at Xue Xian with a hint of reproach.

Xue Xian just rolled his eyes.

While this was going on, Xuanmin gently kicked at a round stone in the courtyard. That stone rolled a couple of times and conveniently came to

rest at Scribe Liu's feet. As Scribe Liu stumbled forward, he stepped on the stone, lost his balance, and pitched to the ground. In an incredible coincidence, he landed squarely on the chest of the youth who'd stopped breathing.

"Khh, kuh, kfff."

Scribe Liu scrambled to his feet, ready to scream at whoever had tripped him. Before he could speak, he heard the seemingly lifeless youth beside him burst into coughs, expelling water with enough force to turn his face crimson.

The people in the hall instantly erupted—some with joy, others with astonishment.

Scribe Liu just stood there. It was a long time before he returned to his senses, whereupon he quickly had someone carry his son back to his room to rest, then ordered them to fetch a doctor after that. He offered a few comforting words to his red-eyed wife before looking at the round stone on the ground, his expression complicated.

He shot Xuanmin a couple of looks. After all the commotion, Liu Xue was exhausted. The sky gradually paled, and the faint light of dawn fell upon the courtyard, subtle as it was.

The scribe scrutinized Xuanmin once more. He still thought this man rather youthful and not at all like a high monk. If nothing else, he clearly lacked the requisite experience. Someone in his twenties becoming a high monk could only be fantasy, and the coins hanging at his waist were dull and unremarkable. Except for some ignorant common folk, anyone would identify him as a swindler.

But the events that'd just happened were impossible to ignore. Right after Xuanmin told him "Someone else took your place," his son Liu Jin had fallen into the well. Next, he'd been running unimpeded when a stone had materialized before him, tripping him so that he'd fallen down on Liu Jin, restoring him to life. One incident could be brushed off as a coincidence, but given the current events, Liu Xue couldn't bring himself to describe them *all* as coincidences.

Could this person really be a high monk?

Scribe Liu clasped his hands and forced a smile to his face, then bowed to Xuanmin. “I was blind! So very blind!”

Xuanmin ignored him. Instead, he raised his eyes and scanned the courtyard.

“I apologize for my earlier rudeness, Master. I hope you can forgive me,” Scribe Liu took the opportunity to say. “There was in fact a reason for my discourtesy. You see this courtyard? I spent a lot of money hiring a designer for the layout, so I just could not believe that my lifespan would run out early. That’s why I mistook the master for a…a scammer.”

Xue Xian snorted. Scribe Liu’s residence did look perfectly fine at first glance. It was south-facing and nestled against the mountains. The courtyard followed the design tenet called “Reclaiming the Four Waters,” which was excellent for gathering wealth and qi. Outside the front hall, a meandering fish pond curved into itself: This was “Winding Waters Grace the Hall,” ensuring professional success and a rise through the ranks.

Xue Xian only had a basic understanding of geomancy, though. He wasn’t human; to study it all would mean he had too much time on his hands. His assessment that something was amiss with the courtyard was entirely instinctual. From the moment he’d entered, an intense discomfort had washed over him. Hence his earlier declaration that Scribe Liu was digging his own grave. As for what the actual problem was and how to resolve it, that was Xuanmin’s concern, not his.

After brawling with Xuanmin’s fingers in a long, one-sided struggle, Xue Xian had finally exhausted himself and quieted down—at least temporarily. For someone like Xue Xian, who’d lived a proud and pampered life, it was particularly suffocating that he could do so little with his flimsy paper body.

Xuanmin shoved him back inside the pouch. Xue Xian was busy rolling his eyes and peeking back out at the courtyard when a voice suddenly spoke beside him.

“What are you mumbling about? Where are we?” Jiang Shining, who’d been languishing in the pouch the whole time, had mustered the

courage to poke his head out at last. He seemed quite afraid of Xuanmin and whispered just loud enough for Xue Xian to hear.

"That scribe's house, Liu or whatever," said Xue Xian. "How do you not know? Are you deaf or what? Everyone here has been howling for who knows how long…"

Jiang Shining's voice went brittle. "A scribe? Ningyang County's Scribe Liu?"

"Who else?" asked Xue Xian, irritated.

When Jiang Shining fell silent, Xue Xian looked at him askance. "Lost your tongue?"

Jiang Shining quietly retreated into the pouch, muttering in a muffled voice, "Just recalling some old affairs."

"What old affairs?"

"There was bad blood between my family's clinic and Scribe Liu."

"What kind of bad blood?"

Jiang Shining was quiet for a long time before he whispered, "The sort involving deaths."

Calling a matter of deaths mere "bad blood" seemed to Xue Xian to be underselling it. Before he could inquire further, Xuanmin turned and focused on a side door.

"Who's behind the wall?" he asked.

He was referring to a narrow door in the side corridor of the courtyard. Behind the door was a narrow path wedged between the fire-prevention walls. It was oddly placed and hidden away—easily overlooked if one wasn't careful.

As if in answer, a thud came from behind the door. It sounded like someone had stepped on a loose tile, jarring it.

Scribe Liu's expression wavered, and he forced a laugh. "Just one of the side wings, part of my residence. It's nothing, nothing at all. Why don't you come inside, Mas—" His attempt to redirect Xuanmin's attention back to the main residence was ruined when someone poked his head out from

behind the narrow door. “Tch. What are you doing out here?” Scribe Liu snapped.

He was speaking to a young man dressed in a padded robe, its color blue-gray. He looked about twenty years old, roughly the same age as Xuanmin. However, there was something peculiar about his expression. He clutched at the doorframe with both hands, his gaze timid yet curious, almost like a child peeking at guests. Befuddled at Scribe Liu’s scolding, he shrank back behind the door, but not completely. Half his face remained visible.

Without lanterns illuminating that area, Xue Xian couldn’t get a clear look at the young man’s face. Still, his instincts told him that this man was connected to Scribe Liu somehow.

“Who is he? Do you recognize him?” Xue Xian whispered to Jiang Shining.

Jiang Shining didn’t even glance at the man in question. “I’ve never been to the Scribe’s residence,” he said feebly. “How am I supposed to recognize anyone?”

Xuanmin frowned at Scribe Liu, whose expression was notably strained, then started walking over to the narrow door.

“Hey, hey, Master—” Scribe Liu exclaimed. He’d never seen a monk behave so brazenly toward his host. “He’s harmless, really,” he called as he followed Xuanmin. “That’s my disappointment of an eldest son, Liu Chong. Just family, nothing suspicious.”

Fearful that his problematic son might embarrass him in front of outsiders, Scribe Liu waved his hand at Liu Chong behind the door, as if coaxing or shooing him away. “Chong-er, be good and return to your house. Dad has important business to discuss with the Master.”

At this, Xuanmin shot Scribe Liu another cool glance. “You had someone design ‘Winding Waters Grace the Hall’ for your front hall. That requires preventing the flow of wind from east to west and amassing qi between north and south, thus balancing yin and yang. However, your west side is open.”

On top of that, the southwest corner was cramped and dark, thus brimming with yin energy. The yin and yang here were clearly out of balance!

As Xuanmin spoke, Xue Xian glanced at the dark and gloomy path behind the small door.

Either Scribe Liu hired a hack to design the layout, or he added this path himself later, he thought.

Sure enough, Scribe Liu's expression grew strained hearing Xuanmin's assessment. "To be honest, well, this path was added afterward."

While he spoke, Xuanmin had already crossed the threshold to stand behind the narrow door. When Liu Chong, Scribe Liu's eldest son, saw their guest approach him, he shrank back a few steps while holding the wall before smiling shyly at Xuanmin.

Xue Xian noticed Liu Chong's stumbling steps. He didn't seem ill, simply slow and clumsy. He wasn't bad-looking either. With one glance, Xue Xian saw that he took after his mother with his fair skin and large eyes. His face should have seemed spirited and quite charming when he smiled, but due to the naivete in his expression, it had a foolish tinge instead. Liu Chong evidently suffered from a mental disability.

Till this point, Xuanmin had remained indifferent to Scribe Liu's alternating brusqueness and bonhomie. Faced with this smiling fool, Xuanmin seemed to grasp the concept of courtesy, and he nodded at Liu Chong. Though his demeanor still lacked warmth, it at least counted as a response.

Scribe Liu flushed a little purple. To Xuanmin, he, a county scribe, was below a fool!

Xue Xian peeked further out from the pouch to better observe. Lying at the end of the narrow path wasn't a dead end, but a rather unremarkable building. It was a shabby-looking thing, resembling a firewood shed. However, Xue Xian saw Liu Chong timidly retreating toward it.

When a child with little knowledge of the world encountered a stranger, they'd flee to the place they felt safest: either their parents' side or

their room. This was something Xue Xian had observed while mingling with humans for six months. Liu Chong was clearly doing the latter.

Immediately, Xue Xian thought Scribe Liu rather strange—what kind of father would allow his son to live in such a dark and forsaken place? Was he raising his son like a rat? That little house was soaked in oppressive yin energy. If he hadn't seen that Liu Chong lived here with his own eyes, he would have thought it a burial mound.

Scribe Liu's shifty behavior earlier was likely from fear that Xuanmin would discover this shed, but Xuanmin had found it anyway. Now, Scribe Liu could only roll with it and try to explain himself.

"My son is a bit odd. He dislikes noise and insists on living somewhere quiet."

What a load of tripe! Xue Xian thought. *Why not send him to live in the cemetery outside the city? That's as peaceful and quiet as you can get, and the yin energy isn't as bad as it is here.*

Even Scribe Liu seemed embarrassed at the nonsense he'd just spouted. He coughed and tried to change the subject. "You mentioned the west side being open. Was that referring to this path?"

"The building as well," said Xuanmin.

"If I had someone seal up the window on the south wall, would that close the west side?" asked Scribe Liu.

"Seal up?" Xuanmin echoed, his tone icy. He frowned, pointing at Liu Chong. "Does he not need to breathe?"

"Ah, that's… I didn't think of that. My mistake."

Xue Xian's opinion of Scribe Liu had plummeted over these few exchanges. His eldest son was simply a bit slow, yet the father seemed to care nothing for his well-being. Scribe Liu's flustered expression at Xuanmin's question was ridiculous. It seemed he hadn't considered the idea of relocating Liu Chong before sealing the opening.

As the sky brightened further, the rest of the courtyard seemed to sharpen, the contours growing clear as if washed with water. Only this little shack remained a murky mass in the dark.

Like Xue Xian, Xuanmin had also noticed the unusual level of yin energy in the area. Without another glance at Scribe Liu, he strode toward the little shack.

Liu Chong scratched his head, apparently confused as to why the guest was heading to his house. For a long moment, he stood there, bewildered. Then, his eyes brightened like he'd spotted a new playmate, and he stumbled forward, using the wall for support as he chased after Xuanmin.

Despite being in his twenties, Liu Chong remained childish, and his gait was unsteady. While trying to stay shoulder to shoulder with Xuanmin, he sometimes stumbled too far ahead or fell behind, but the whole time, his eyes remained fixed on Xuanmin's waist as if he'd spotted something fun and exciting. Not once did he look away.

Liu Chong was focused on the opening of the hidden pouch where Xue Xian lay.

Xue Xian felt himself bristle at Liu Chong's stare. Unfortunately, Xue Xian hadn't retreated in time, and now he couldn't even if he wanted to. Like he could move while this fool was staring at him! It'd be one thing if he made Liu Chong cry, but what if he got worked up and did something rash?

If that happened, Xue Xian would really be in trouble.

Chapter 4:
Gold Ingots

THE SHACK WASN'T FAR. Xuanmin was tall, his legs long. A short moment later, he was standing at its entrance.

From Xue Xian's vantage point, he could glimpse through the half-open door. What he saw inside shocked him. Piled next to the door was a heap of yellowish objects. At first glance, they looked like gold ingots, but on closer inspection, he realized they'd been folded from paper. These were paper ingots, folded from yellow wax paper and meant to be burned as offerings for the dead.

While Xue Xian was busy being surprised, Liu Chong—who was right behind Xuanmin—piped up. "Um, can I play with that?"

He was pointing at Xuanmin's side. Xuanmin looked down at his hip, unsure what Liu Chong was referring to.

"Yellow paper." Liu Chong pointed again.

Now Xuanmin understood. He was pointing to the paper doll at the pouch's opening.

Xue Xian was speechless. *The hell?! This guy sure has some guts! Daring to treat a dragon like a toy? Does he have a death wish?*

What would a fool know? One wrong move and the young man would rip him right in half. A bit of carelessness and Xue Xian might find himself in eight pieces! An indescribable pain coursed through him at the thought. Throwing caution to the wind, Xue Xian scuttled back inside the pouch and pinched Xuanmin hard through the white hemp.

If you dare hand me over, I'll make you pay! Xue Xian thought.

Xuanmin said nothing but wondered, *Why is this evil spirit so unruly?*

Worried that Xuanmin was too stupid to understand what the pinch meant, Xue Xian took the chance to flip himself over the moment Liu

Chong averted his gaze, so that the doll's painted face was facing up. From that position, Xue Xian glared up at Xuanmin with his ink-dot eyes.

However, a painting could never compare to a real face. Moreover, Xue Xian's artistic skills were passable at best, and certainly not a master's. His ink eyes lacked the spirit of real ones. Perturbed by the pinch, Xuanmin looked down at Xue Xian coldly, ready to issue the troublemaking spirit a warning, only to meet those painted eyes peering out of his pouch.

He started, genuinely caught off guard. Belly up, with a pair of deadened black eyes, the paper doll was the very picture of a wide-eyed corpse.

Xuanmin had captured his fair share of demons and ghosts on his travels. Most of them had been defiant before being subdued, then respectful and fearful afterward, until they were put to rest. Few were like Xue Xian, who refused to settle down even after being captured, and no other had been *this* brazen, tirelessly causing problem after problem. It was almost dramatic in its behavior—it could practically put on an entire play by itself.

As Xuanmin thought this, his eyes flitted briefly over the paper doll, then he reached in with two fingers and plucked it out of the pouch again.

You'll pay for this! Xue Xian screamed internally.

Xuanmin's fingers were unlike those of people who lived through the regular bustle of daily life. They were pencil-straight, slender, and spotless, as if they'd never been dirtied. He didn't seem like someone who'd grown up in a temple, and he certainly didn't resemble a wandering monk. Rather, he was more like a pampered nobleman.

At this moment, Xue Xian didn't have the luxury to notice these things.

Between two fingers, Xuanmin held out the doll, bringing it a little closer to Liu Chong.

In the future, I'll unleash all my lightning on you! Every day, around the clock! Xue Xian thought.

"This?" Xuanmin asked Liu Chong.

I swear to fry you to a crisp, or I'll change my name to "four-legged worm"!

"Mm." Liu Chong nodded vigorously, then smiled that foolish grin again.

The hell are you smiling about?!

Just as Liu Chong was reaching out to take the paper doll, Xuanmin shook his head. "You can't," he said, his expression as placid as ever.

Guess you have some sense after all. Xue Xian calmed down after all his mental shrieking and sighed in relief. The paper doll, originally taut in Xuanmin's grip, suddenly sagged, draping limp and soft, as if it had gone from half paralyzed to fully paralyzed.

Liu Chong looked seriously at Xuanmin and nodded again, but his expression was crestfallen. He knew nothing of people or the world, so he also knew nothing about tact or disguising his feelings. His disappointment was written all over his face.

Persons with disabilities tended to move slower and less nimbly than the average. At the same time, they put great strength and effort into every action, whether it was staring, articulating speech, or even nodding or shaking their heads. The resulting image might have been clumsy, but it tugged on the heartstrings.

Xue Xian hung between Xuanmin's fingers like a limp noodle as he glanced at Liu Chong before firmly looking away. He feared the young man was a poison, one that would make others as stupid as he was. If Xue Xian observed Liu Chong any longer, he might lose his mind and jump right into the fool's hands himself. Now, *that* would be something.

However, even more surprising was how Xuanmin acted with greater frankness than Liu Chong. The former completely ignored the latter's disappointed expression. Instead, Xuanmin brazenly stepped forward into the shack—though, before that, he recalled the concept of courtesy (and shame) and nodded at Liu Chong.

Would it kill you to say one more word? If Liu Chong can understand what your nod means, I'll change my family name to yours! Xue Xian

thought.

Before Xue Xian could scoff, Liu Chong made it inside his little house first. He happily waved at Xuanmin and said, “Come in!”

Exactly like a child who’d found a playmate.

Xue Xian grimaced. *I might as well just keep quiet and dangle here,* he thought. After flailing around for so long, he had no choice but to settle.

Liu Chong pushed the half-open door wide open, revealing its interior in all its glory. The yellow paper ingots were everywhere, in far greater numbers than Xue Xian had glimpsed before. They weren’t just behind the door: Glancing around revealed that there was barely anywhere to stand.

Seeing the state of his eldest son’s living space, Scribe Liu turned his face away, his expression full of displeasure. He showed no intention of stepping inside and waited a few feet away from the door with his hands behind his back.

He was probably in turmoil right now. He wanted Xuanmin to help fix the feng shui of his residence, but he also wanted to drive the rude and tactless monk out. Anyone capable of reading the atmosphere would have reined in their behavior to avoid further offending their host. Unfortunately, Xuanmin didn’t care about that. Not only that, he wouldn’t even look at him! Scribe Liu could barely restrain his rage.

Liu Chong’s space was simply furnished, completely unlike what one would expect for a young master of the county scribe’s residence. Saying it looked like servant’s quarters would be no exaggeration. There was only a square table and two wooden chairs, as well as a bed that was too small for Liu Chong. In the already-tiny building, someone had even erected a pretentious partition to create an outer and inner chamber. It divided the bed from the table and chairs, adding to the cramped atmosphere. Everything there looked worn and aged, like they’d been used for years. The only splash of color came from the yellow ingots heaped everywhere.

Xuanmin picked one up and inspected it closely, turning it this way and that.

From the tips of the fingers on Xuanmin's other hand, Xue Xian had a lower vantage point. Since he was also facing up, the underside of the ingot was visible to him. Written there were three characters: *father, dusk, dusk.*

What kind of stupid nonsense is this?

Only after some mental cursing did Xue Xian realize it wasn't three separate characters but one: *Dad.* In Liu Chong's clumsy and juvenile handwriting, the strokes of the character were too spaced out.

Having seen the ingot, Xue Xian understood Scribe Liu's displeasure toward his son. Putting a living person's name on this kind of ingot was no different from cursing them. However, one look at Liu Chong's guileless face would tell you that he was merely playing.

Xue Xian soon swallowed that thought, because Xuanmin continued to pick up the ingots, and each one had writing on the bottom with childish strokes.

Trapped and bored, Xue Xian counted seven ingots in total. Two with *father, dusk, dusk—Dad*, and three with *woman, good—Mom*. Two more were completely blank.

What kind of bizarre hobby was this?

Still, as simple as Liu Chong was, he knew how to categorize things. The pile next to the door all had *father, dusk, dusk* written on them. Liu Chong had written these for his father, Scribe Liu. The heap by the table was for his mother. As for the ones scattered on the ground, he'd yet to write on them.

Then…what about the pile next to the bed?

Xue Xian wasn't the only person who noticed this. After briefly examining the ingots outside the partition, Xuanmin stepped into the so-called inner chamber where the bed was located.

The moment he did, a gust of yin wind blew into Xue Xian's face, and he sneezed.

Liu Chong was baffled. He stared at the expressionless Xuanmin for a while before looking at his hand. Liu Chong seemed unable to understand

how his fingers could have sneezed.

However, neither Xuanmin nor Xue Xian paid any attention to this. They were busy being stunned by the thick smog of yin energy in the room, and their gazes fell simultaneously onto the pile of paper ingots by the bed.

With a furrowed brow, Xuanmin walked over. He picked up one of the ingots. This time, the bottom said neither *Dad* nor *Mom*. Instead, there was a large smudge of ink. It seemed he'd written something more complex than before, resulting in a smeared mess. Picking up two more, Xuanmin found them the same.

After staring at their undersides for a while, he managed to mostly make out the character: *Liu*.

He knew little about the Liu family, so his mind went right to Scribe Liu and his two sons after seeing it. However, judging from the smeared blot, the original writing didn't say Liu Xue, nor did it say Liu Chong or Liu Jin.

Just as he bent down to pick up another, something rolled out of the pouch at his waist. That something uttered "Ouch!" as it tumbled right onto the heap of paper ingots. When it hit the ground, it suddenly inflated like a balloon and transformed into a whole person.

The person's skin was deathly pale, with dark circles beneath his eyes —the picture of a weary scholar. It was none other than Jiang Shining.

He, too, had never expected to suddenly transform from a paper doll to a person.

"Huh? How did I fall out?" he asked, bewildered.

To Xue Xian's surprise, Liu Chong wasn't at all frightened by this extreme transformation, so he dropped his paper doll act.

"There's too much yin energy here," Xue Xian explained.

Ghosts loved yin energy, after all. That was why Jiang Shining was immobile during the day, when yang energy was plentiful. By contrast, Liu Chong's room contained more yin energy than a cemetery, so this helped Jiang Shining.

Somehow, despite the oppressive yin energy, Liu Chong was alive and well. *That* was strange.

Jiang Shining was still puzzled. “Why didn’t you also fall out of the pouch?” he asked Xue Xian.

“Well, I’m not dead yet,” Xue Xian said irritably. “I’m not like you.”

“Why are you clinging to a paper figure if you’re not dead?”

Jiang Shining thought there had to be something very odd about this Xue fellow. If he wasn’t a ghost, then he still had a body, but if he still had a body, why leave it to live his days as a paper doll? Why do that unless there was something wrong with him?

“What’s it to you?” Xue Xian drawled from his position between Xuanmin’s fingers. “If you have the time to talk, spend it getting to your feet instead.”

After all, Jiang Shining had transformed into a whole person. He might have been sickly and thin as a reed, but he still had mass. The paper ingots couldn’t bear his weight. They had been mostly squashed, his tumble pancaking the small golden mountain into flat land.

Looking around, Jiang Shining realized what he was sitting on and quickly cupped his hands, bowing to Liu Chong in apology. “Sorry, sorry.”

Liu Chong had been frozen next to him, but he now returned to his senses. “Ah!” he cried. He unceremoniously shoved Jiang Shining aside and knelt on the ground, carefully trying to push the squashed paper ingots back into shape.

Liu Chong’s strength was far above average, so Jiang Shining was sent tumbling, his frail body unable to withstand that force. He crashed into the nearby wooden cabinet, shoving it back a few inches, until it slammed into the wall with a thud. Jiang Shining fell into a heap before awkwardly propping himself up, wanting to help Liu Chong fold paper ingots as an apology.

But as he braced himself to stand, he gasped in pain and yanked his hand away. A hole had opened in his palm, and though there was no blood, the pain pulled his face into a grimace. Paper bodies could allow drifting

souls to become substantial, enabling them to walk, stand, and touch things, bringing their existence closer to that of a living person. However, this meant they were more vulnerable to injury.

"Why are there nails in the floor beneath the cabinet?" Jiang Shining complained, before he turned to whisper at Xue Xian, "Next time, well, if there's still a next time, could you use leather instead of paper?"

"Why not just use human skin?" said Xue Xian thoughtlessly.

Jiang Shining gaped at him.

Xuanmin's expression stayed placid, but his fingers slid over to press down on Xue Xian's mouth, lest this troublesome thing continue spewing nonsense.

As Jiang Shining got up, he caught a glimpse of the patch of floor where he'd punctured his hand and discovered something. "Hm? How strange. There's a piece of paper attached to the nail."

Hearing this, Xuanmin frowned, gathered up his robe, and squatted down. The cabinet had been pushed aside, revealing a small patch of ground where something sharp and pointy jutted up. Xuanmin tore off a corner of his robe and used the white hemp to rub at it.

As the mud was wiped off, the sharp object could be identified—a copper nail with three ridges running along its body. Since it was caked with mud, the nail had been here for at least two or three years, yet it still gleamed. It was no ordinary object.

Most importantly, it was nailed to a piece of paper with its surface obscured by dust. Xuanmin frowned and studied it as he wiped the thick layer of grime away.

Sure enough, it was a piece of yellow paper, on which intricate diagrams were drawn in red cinnabar. He didn't need to understand the contents to know what it was.

Jiang Shining was stunned at first, but then he pushed the cabinet further to the side, exposing even more of the ground. The cabinet had been concealing three copper nails, each pinning a yellow talisman to the ground. One pointed southwest, another northeast, and the last northwest.

"What kind of talismans are these? For longevity and health?" Jiang Shining asked.

He stared at the yellow paper for a while. Inexplicably, his body began to warm. Ever since he'd become a wandering ghost, the idea of heat was alien to him. He never felt warm, and a pervasive cold hung around his body like a cloak of frost. He'd long grown used to it. To feel warmth now was more than a bit unsettling. He cautiously shuffled a couple of steps to the side.

Xue Xian was usually quick to mock him, but with his mouth pressed shut, that was impossible. Now there was a long moment of very awkward silence after Jiang Shining's question.

That silence was finally broken by Xuanmin, who had finished examining the diagrams.

"It's a feng shui array," he said.

No shit, Xue Xian thought.

Standing outside, Scribe Liu listened as noise after noise came from within, until he couldn't take it anymore. He stared at the wall beside the door for a moment, then walked to the doorway and called inside, "Master, did someone bump into something? Is that foolish son of mine causing trouble?"

He seemed to avidly detest this building—refusing to step inside it even on pain of death. From the outside, he cast a disgusted glance at the

paper ingots within.

At the sound of his voice, Xuanmin stood up and walked past the partition to the building's outer chamber. "Who lives in the building to the northwest?" he asked Scribe Liu.

Perplexed, Scribe Liu glanced toward the northeast of the compound. "That's where I live."

Xuanmin shot him a dubious glance. "The northeast?"

"Huh? Oh, the northeast? That northeast house is where my son Liu Jin lives. You know, my younger son who fell into the well earlier. Why do you ask, Master? Is there something wrong with those two buildings?"

Xuanmin didn't answer right away.

"Have you ever heard of a layout called 'Drawing the River to the Sea'?" he eventually asked. His face was inscrutable and emotionless, as if he were inquiring about something mundane like what someone ate or drank.

In contrast, Scribe Liu's face turned an ashen gray. He stood there for a long time, stiff and frozen, before his eyes swiveled to look in the direction of the cabinet inside the inner chambers. Seeing that it'd been moved, his expression darkened.

"Th-that's… I won't hide it from you, Master. I've been suffering from some health issues the last two years, s-so…"

While Scribe Liu was stammering outside the house, Jiang Shining had moved back a couple of paces, just enough to avoid Scribe Liu's line of sight. For one thing, a dead person standing in front of someone who recognized him was asking for trouble. For another, when Jiang Shining saw Scribe Liu, he was overcome with an incredible surge of resentment. He remembered how much his parents had suffered back in those days, and he couldn't help gritting his teeth.

In the meantime, Liu Chong had noticed the talismans while he was organizing the paper ingots. With his mind the way it was, he was easily distracted. He stared at the yellow paper talismans for a while, then dropped

the ingots he was holding and shuffled over to kneel in front of the talismans.

When a young child saw something novel, they'd always reach out to touch it. It didn't matter if it was clean or dirty, safe or dangerous. Liu Chong's mind was stuck at that naive age. He stared at the three copper nails for a while, then couldn't help reaching out to touch one of the points.

It was razor-sharp, as if freshly honed. It was capable of slicing through hair with ease, to say nothing of Liu Chong's thin skin. He ended up with a bloodied hand.

"Hey, don't move!" Jiang Shining warned, but he was too late. Blood dripped down the nail, seeping into the yellow paper.

Started by Jiang Shining's cry, Liu Chong looked up with a blank expression. For a moment, Jiang Shining sensed that the old house had fallen eerily quiet. It seemed like even the cold wind that had been relentlessly battering the walls had stopped.

Ghosts were more sensitive than the living. He felt like there was no air around him at all, so unsettling was the quiet.

Xuanmin had been standing at the door, eye to eye with Scribe Liu, but now he frowned and looked up, glancing at the sky.

The wind was still. All was silent.

Chapter 5:
Ghostfence

THE UNUSUAL SILENCE didn't last long. In just a few blinks, the wind roared back to life. It moaned and wailed, now inexplicably mournful, quite unlike how it had been. As the wind howled back and forth, it grew louder and louder, like the spirits of the wild were crying in a spine-chilling chorus. Amid the ghostly wailing, a sudden droning filled the air, like the clash of metal on metal, but not quite the same.

Xue Xian went taut where he lay between Xuanmin's fingers, for he knew that sound well. The object he was searching for made the exact same one.

To the northeast!

Xue Xian struggled to lift his head and peer in that direction. Hadn't Xuanmin just asked who was living in the northeast building?

As Xue Xian pondered this, the strange drone melded into the wind's wailing, soaring louder. In that instant, everyone felt as if they'd been struck hard on the back of their heads. Their ears rang, and their vision faded to black as they lost consciousness all at once.

When the droning subsided and the darkness dropped from his eyes like sesame seeds, Xue Xian realized that something was amiss. Beneath him was the ground, paved with dark stone tiles. When he moved, he could feel the clumps of dark green moss there. Clearly, he'd fallen to the ground, and the bald donkey that'd been holding him was nowhere to be found.

And not just that guy. He looked around only to see that Scribe Liu had also vanished. Behind Xue Xian was still a building, but this one had proper doors, complete with intricate carvings on the wooden doorframe. Clearly, it wasn't Liu Chong's house, so he didn't expect that Jiang Shining and the others would be inside.

In fact, this new location was eerily quiet. There was no sign of human presence. Like an empty manor, vast yet soundless.

“What kind of accursed place is this?” muttered Xue Xian.

He was in a rather troubling situation. If someone else had been thrust into a location like this one, they could at least walk around to learn more. But as a paraplegic, Xue Xian couldn’t walk.

In lieu of that, he sprawled out, spreading his creased paper body. After bracing his hands on the ground, he propped himself up, face to the sky, his head swaying as he admired the scenery.

Other than the house behind him, there was some old ivy creeping along the wall to his left, as well as a tree that could be used for shade, its branches just barely stretching over the wall. To his right was a corridor and a courtyard wall. Through a narrow door, he could faintly make out a small garden within another part of the estate. From this angle, he could tell that it was a meticulously designed compound. Though, no matter how exquisite an estate was, it was still unsettling with no signs of life.

Fortunately, Xue Xian had once been a master of the heavens. Even the creepiest of scenes couldn’t frighten him. He just needed to be careful.

“Ahead of me is south, behind me is north…”

He hadn’t been aimlessly looking around. He’d studied his surroundings to use the growth of moss along the tiles, the course of the ivy, and the orientation of the house to establish a general sense of direction. If he wasn’t mistaken, he was in the northeast corner of the compound.

The northeast corner. Xue Xian sucked in a breath. “That sounds familiar.”

If this was still Scribe Liu’s residence, then the northeast corner was where Scribe Liu’s youngest son, Liu Jin—the boy who’d almost drowned—resided. The droning sound he’d heard had also come from this direction.

Was the object he sought here?!

Xue Xian jolted and sat straight up. Holding his breath, he listened intently for a moment, but heard nothing, including the distinct droning he was looking for.

Sweeping aside a clump of moss in front of him, he grimaced in disdain before pressing himself face-first to the ground. This time, he heard a small, faint noise.

Oddly enough, the noise seemed distant at times and close by at others, without a fixed source. Moreover, it was so faint that the moment his attention wavered, he would lose it. The sound flitted back and forth, back and forth, its manner almost teasing, and Xue Xian was soon deeply annoyed. Before long, his temper flared. He longed to rip up the entire ground, charge down there, and reduce everything to ashes. Alas, this flimsy paper body of his could not do any of that.

As his anger grew, a gust of wind blew in from the latticed window on the wall. It was winter, so the winds blew with quite some force. Xue Xian, used to seizing opportunities, did not let this one pass him by. He spread his paper body to catch the breeze and was instantly lifted into the air. He then took the chance to grab a curling tendril of ivy.

In a few quick moves, he had hoisted himself up into the shade-giving tree. The tree was tall and straight, with few branches. One stretched over the wall, so Xue Xian chose this as the stop for his windy ride.

His flimsy paper body draped over the branch. One wrong move would send him drifting to the ground, and his position didn't offer much of a view, so Xue Xian decided he would transform, just as Jiang Shining had.

A soft rush of air whipped around Xue Xian as he returned to his human form. In the light of day, his handsome features were crisp and charming. His dark eyes shone like cold pools, and beneath their misty surfaces lay a sharp, unbridled spirit. With a hand on the trunk and his other hand braced on the branch, he steadied his body and seated himself firmly upon the wall.

After taking his spot, the first thing he did was look beyond the courtyard wall. He gave one glance before whipping his head back, his face blank as he stared into the courtyard. Then, he looked outside again. He did this several times, until a slight crack appeared in his expression, like porcelain that was about to shatter.

Why the hell do things look exactly the same both inside and outside of the wall?!

Now, this was quite the situation. If he wasn't mistaken, he'd encountered a ghostfence. To think someone dared to use a ghostfence on him. It was a first.

Of course, this phenomenon couldn't have happened without reason; something must have caused it. After a moment's thought, the only explanation that came to Xue Xian's mind was the feng shui layout Xuanmin had mentioned earlier, "Drawing the River to the Sea." Had something disrupted it, causing it to go haywire and trap them all inside? If that was the case, then why was this manor so eerily silent? Was that due to the ghostfence's influence, or was he truly the only one here?

Although the view from the wall was superior to the one from the ground, it still wasn't spectacular. The courtyard was full of fire-prevention walls of varying heights, blocking most of the view. All Xue Xian had seen amounted to white walls, dark roofs, gray tiles, and several doors that might or might not lead to dead ends. He studied the narrow doors around him, then glanced over the various walls, both high and low. Slowly, he began to grasp the situation.

When a closed-off courtyard like this one was laid with a ghostfence, the key to breaking free lay in the Eight Gates of the Qimen Dunjia[3]—Initiation, Repose, Life, Injury, Obstruction, Scenery, Fright, and Death. Each gate led to a different path. To choose the wrong path meant getting trapped at best, or meeting pain or death at worst. Plus, this courtyard had been constructed in layers of squares. This meant its Eight Gates would also be layered, complicating the solution further.

Xue Xian wasn't an average person, so he refused to waste time figuring out such trivial details. He'd never imagined that he'd encounter a ghostfence while being unable to move. He'd rather someone just stab him than sit there and calculate where the Life and Death Gates were.

"I have to look for people while dragging around a pair of crippled legs?" He sneered. *I don't hate myself that much!*

He'd always been proud. Even at the threat of death, he'd never humiliate himself thus, unless it was absolutely necessary. And if it was absolutely necessary…he'd rather someone kill him anyway.

This miserable manor barely saw any wind, and there was not much to lean on. Even if he did figure out where to go, how was he supposed to get there? By crawling? Or sliding on his ass? Just the image made him grind his teeth. Forget it. Others might choose to crawl, but never him!

Xue Xian leaned against the tree, his tongue pressed between his teeth as he thought. Eventually, he reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out a sheet of yellow paper. The paper was wrinkled and creased, clearly having gone through some hard times. Xue Xian looked at it with disdain before pinching one edge and shaking it out.

On the paper was an ugly, almost illegible scrawl, but Xue Xian could read it.

He'd picked this up from a Daoist while passing through Raozhou Prefecture. The man grew a thin, crooked mustache, wore a ragged cloth cap, and had a bruise on his temple that was indistinguishable from a birthmark or the result of a beating. He spent his days near a bridge, selling the talismans he'd made himself. He was an odd fellow; as a seller of talismans, he should have ensured his calligraphy at least looked the part. Instead, he shamelessly hawked his stack of chicken-scratch talismans, seemingly unworried that they might not sell.

Xue Xian had spent a few days at his stall and examined the talismans he'd made. Most of them were mere decorative toys, but one or two had fluid brushstrokes that were decent for minor tasks.

Still, they were *very* minor tasks. For example, the evil-repelling talisman could ward off a few mosquitoes at best. The longevity talisman could, at most, alleviate some minor symptoms of illness.

As for the one Xue Xian held right now, he'd watched the Daoist write it out: *I call upon the thunder of the Dragon Lord of the South.*

Xue Xian squinted as he passed his eyes over the characters. The writing twisted and meandered, resembling earthworms as it wiggled all

over the paper. That he could remember what it said was an impressive feat in itself.

The talisman's thunder-calling purpose was easy to guess from its contents. It was a testament to how bored that Daoist had been to practice making something like this.

Despite its name, summoning the Dragon Lord of the South (or whatever) was far beyond this crinkled talisman's capabilities. At most, it might bring a cloud or two to block the sun.

However, in Xue Xian's hands, that same talisman became a different story—because the dragon the talisman wanted to summon was basically Xue Xian himself. Right now, his paper body was incapable of casting the spell, but he could use the talisman as the medium.

It was worth a try, at least.

He produced a small porcelain bottle from his lapels and pulled out its stopper. A strange, metallic smell rose into the air, making him wrinkle his brow. This might have been his own blood, but that didn't mean he found the smell pleasing.

Spreading the talisman flat on his palm, he dripped a drop of crimson blood upon it. The blood instantly soaked into the paper and bloomed into a stain. After putting the bottle away, he tossed the talisman into the air.

The moment it left his fingers, flames erupted from the center of the bloodstain. In the blink of an eye, the paper turned into ash. As the ash scattered, a wailing wind whipped around him, and dark clouds rolled in from afar. The sky blackened as swiftly as if ink had been poured across it. Next, crackling white lightning zigzagged down from the heavens, and a peal of thunder followed that exploded in Xue Xian's ears.

Perhaps the lightning had struck the array's border, or perhaps it'd shaken the foundation itself. Either way, there was a resounding, earth-shattering boom as the bolt of lightning dispersed through the ground. Xue Xian remained on the wall next to the tree, watching coolly as the gray tiles before him shattered to powder. He didn't even blink.

The entire courtyard quaked and trembled. It was a long time before it finally calmed down. Looking up at the sky, Xue Xian was a little disappointed. Even with the talisman as his conduit, he'd only managed to conjure a single lightning strike. Nevertheless, the grand thunder wasn't completely in vain. It'd torn open a crack somewhere in the array, making a hole in the once closed-off compound. Faint whispers poured in from that wound and filled the entire courtyard.

So, it was true—he *wasn't* the only person here. The others should have been drawn inside the array as well. They were just scattered across different sections and unaware of one another's presence.

Xue Xian idly snapped a curled tendril from the ivy next to him and twined it around his fingers while leaning against the trunk. He closed his eyes, listening intently to the noises whistling through the narrow opening. He was trying to pick out anything unusual from among those jumbled, fragmented sounds.

After a while, he indeed caught the hint of a…

A bell?

"That's not right…" Xue Xian clicked his tongue and frowned. The sound was muffled in the whipping wind—either its source was far away or the narrow opening it funneled through was creating the illusion of distance. It was reminiscent of the small bells dangling on an ox cart, but with some slight differences.

Copper bells…or copper coins?

As this thought rose to his mind, the sound grew clearer. Sure enough, it was the tinkling of copper coins as they lightly struck each other.

Xue Xian opened his eyes, his expression blank, and the tendril of ivy wrapped around his hand broke in two with a snap.

In that short second, the clatter of coins grew much closer. Xue Xian listened; it seemed to be coming from right outside the wall. The narrow door in the corridor suddenly creaked open, and Xue Xian looked up, still twisting his ivy tendril.

A young monk clad in a thin white hemp robe walked toward the wall without a sound. Wearing such thin clothing on a freezing winter day like this one left even onlookers feeling cold, as if the white hemp itself carried the chill of frost.

Xuanmin was already standing by the wall and refastening the string of copper coins he held to his waist when Xue Xian realized that the monk never made any sound when walking. Had he made the clinking noises on purpose?

Next to the wall, Xuanmin looked up, his calm gaze sweeping briefly over Xue Xian. The man on the wall was extraordinarily handsome, like a sword that'd been sheathed so its sharp edges were concealed, but he seemed too thin, and his complexion was even more ashen thanks to the black robe he wore. The air of heavy illness around him juxtaposed with his natural sharpness, and he seemed at once complicated and enigmatic.

Whenever Xue Xian wore an expressionless face, he gave off the misleading impression of prudence and restraint. Holding onto that image of aloofness, he looked down at Xuanmin for a moment, until he couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes.

"It had to be you…"

Angrily, he crushed the snapped tendril in his hand into a ball. He was the type who couldn't keep his hands still, not even when he was up on a wall. After casting a few resentful glances at Xuanmin, he pitched the crumpled ball of ivy at him.

Xuanmin shook his head and raised his hand to catch the projectile. "What was that thunderstorm about?" he asked.

Xue Xian arched a brow. "You're not going to ask who I am?" After all, he'd been a clump of moss back when Xuanmin had picked him up, then a flimsy paper doll. He'd never appeared before him in human form.

Xuanmin opened his hand. Sitting in his slender palm was the evidence of Xue Xian's antics—the ball of ivy. He was a man of few words, his expression always indifferent, but his open palm conveyed one message: *There's only one troublemaker on your level. I'd recognize you even if you burned to ashes.*

Xuanmin tossed the ball of ivy beneath the tree, then reminded Xue Xian once more, “You haven’t said what that thunderstorm was about.”

“Oh,” said Xue Xian, unconcerned. “Nothing much. Just wanted to let everyone know I was here. Makes it easier for them to find me.”

Xuanmin had nothing to say to that. The lightning had practically rent both sky and earth with its terrifying power and roaring thunderclap, ready to blast the Liu residence into smithereens. All of that just to make a sound, to tell everyone that someone was waiting here?

At these words, a crack appeared in Xuanmin’s frosty visage for the very first time.

Xue Xian found his expression hilarious, and his own face relaxed into a half smile. “Oh? You followed the thunder here yourself? Looks like it wasn’t in vain. Good thing you got here fast. I was considering whether to call another.”

Xuanmin stared at him in silence, then said coldly, “If you did, searching for the Eight Gates would be pointless. I suppose, with everything reduced to ashes, we could save on funeral fees.”

“You’re a monk. How could you talk about money? You bald…” Xue Xian turned his face away and swallowed the *donkey* part of the epithet. Then he continued very seriously, “Aren’t you afraid of offending Buddha?”

Xuanmin didn’t answer. *The person who summoned lightning for fun has no right to say such a thing.*

“You said you were looking for the Eight Gates just now. Did you find them?” Xue Xian asked. “If you did, that makes things easy. Take me with you. And if you didn’t, don’t worry. I’ll think of a way to summon more lightning. Maybe we can blast this array right open.”

Despite saying so, he thought, *You’d better tell me you found them. I only had one thunderstorm talisman with me, and it was single-use.*

Fortunately, Xuanmin didn’t let him down. He nodded. “You can get off that wall.” Then, he turned and walked away.

His white acolyte's robe fluttered like the clouds. After just a few steps, he was disappearing into the distance.

Not long after, he stopped and looked back at Xue Xian, who hadn't moved.

Xue Xian patted his legs nonchalantly. "Useless. I can't walk," he declared boldly.

Xuanmin frowned, thinking that Xue Xian was playing some trick again. "You ran quite fast for an evil spirit earlier, didn't you?" After all, he'd flipped himself onto the servant boy's collar in seconds. His nimbleness spoke for itself.

Xue Xian sneered. "You must be blind on top of stupid. Was I using my legs to run then? No, I borrowed someone else's."

The tactless monk and troublemaking evil spirit stared at each other for a long time. Finally, the former acceded; he returned to the wall.

Xue Xian's legs lay hidden beneath his black robes, but through them Xuanmin could see the jut of his knees. Most of the time, the legs of those who were bedridden and incapable of walking were gangly and atrophied from disuse, but Xue Xian's were not. The outline of his legs through the robes revealed that they were no different from an average person's, not at all like a typical paraplegic's.

Xuanmin scrutinized them for a bit, then reached out and grabbed Xue Xian's ankle. Xue Xian jumped, startled. Had he any feeling left in his legs, he would have instantly sent Xuanmin flying with a kick.

You dare touch them? Think you can just grab a dragon's claws, huh?! You must have a death wish!

Xuanmin took in his reaction. When startled, a person with functional legs would not move only their upper body while their lower body remained still. It seemed Xue Xian was telling the truth. His legs were indeed paralyzed.

Lifting his gaze, Xuanmin formed a mudra with one hand while extending the other one to Xue Xian. "Come down here."

Xue Xian looked at his palm askance, then eyed Xuanmin's stature. The loose robe further accentuated Xuanmin's tall and slender frame. His shoulders and back were rod-straight, and it was clear that his thinness wasn't the fragile, willowy type; it harbored strength. Still, he wasn't exactly muscular.

Xue Xian raised his chin, skeptical. “You intend to support me with only one arm? You’re kidding.”

Unfazed, Xuanmin left his hand outstretched.

“Fine. But if I end up breaking something, you’ll have to take responsibility,” Xue Xian said blithely.

He braced his arms against the wall and leaped off. In the next second, he transformed from man to paper doll with a poof. He even adjusted himself to Xuanmin’s palm; the paper figure was now smaller as it fell, no larger than a hand. It fluttered like a leaf down into Xuanmin’s palm, though its spread arms and legs made it look more like a starfish.

After witnessing Xue Xian in his human form, being confronted with that lifeless painted face—reminiscent of a wide-eyed corpse—was still a jarring experience, even with the size difference. Xuanmin averted his gaze, unwilling to assault his eyes any further, and placed Xue Xian back inside the pouch.

However, Xuanmin showed a bit of sympathy this time. He didn’t shove Xue Xian to the bottom of the pouch, but left his head out in the open. That way he could lean against the pouch’s opening and breathe a little from time to time.

Surprisingly, Xue Xian remained unsatisfied. “Somewhere else, please.” Despite his words, his tone was anything but polite.

Xuanmin found himself caught off guard. After a few exchanges, Xue Xian had already forgotten that he was the captive and was starting to throw his weight around. Had there ever been a prisoner who would so boldly demand a master bedroom?

Looking down at the doll, Xuanmin asked, “Where else?”

A paper doll didn’t have a skeleton, so Xue Xian easily twisted his head the entire way around. “The shoulder!” When Xuanmin didn’t reply, Xue Xian even had the audacity to continue, “I can’t see anything from this stupid spot. The angle’s too low. I want to be on your shoulder!”

His shoulder? Why not ask for the heavens next?

“No longer afraid of falling?” Xuanmin asked blandly.

“What, are your shoulders lopsided? Or do you bounce when you walk? Why would I fall if you don’t sway about?” Xue Xian snapped back without a second thought.

Xue Xian truly had a comeback for everything. Defeated, Xuanmin shook his head. “Come up.” He then paid no further heed to his passenger and started walking.

Xue Xian crawled out of the pouch and waited, but Xuanmin didn’t reach down to help him.

“Your hand?” Xue Xian soon demanded.

“Climb up by yourself,” Xuanmin said.

Xue Xian stared in surly silence. To a pampered lord like him, crawling around on the ground was a deep humiliation. He’d rather die than do so. To climb using his arms like a monkey… Well, that was just barely tolerable. He looked up, assessed Xuanmin’s height, and chose to debase himself, stretching out his precious “dragon claws” and catching them into the monk’s robes.

Xuanmin’s clothes had a peculiar texture. The fabric wasn’t quite like raw hemp, but neither did it feel like the processed kind. The weave wasn’t particularly delicate, but it was still soft, and the spotless fabric was bleached almost snow-white. They didn’t look like robes that the average monk could afford, and there was an indescribable smell to them, like a pine forest deep within the mountains, blanketed in fresh snow.

The featherlight Xue Xian swiftly climbed from Xuanmin’s hip to his collar with a few scampering moves. Getting from his collar to the shoulder only required a quick flip of Xue Xian’s paper body, and it was the shorter route as well—yet he chose not to go that way. Instead, he clung to Xuanmin’s collar while gazing at his shoulders, then looked up once more.

His bizarre angle afforded him a view of Xuanmin’s slender, pointed chin, but he couldn’t see anything beyond that. Xue Xian briefly adjusted his position, then flung himself upward to latch onto Xuanmin’s chin. Like a cat with its tail on fire, he climbed up the bridge of Xuanmin’s nose, then

pushed himself off Xuanmin's brow to leap sideways onto his shoulder. Though no feet were involved, it was an apt demonstration of "stepping on someone's face."

Xuanmin didn't know what to say to such a show of audacity and fearlessness. Xue Xian couldn't have been an insignificant demon. However, Xuanmin could not sense much of Xue Xian's original body in his aura, making it difficult for the monk to determine exactly what kind of evil spirit the paper doll was.

Speaking of his original body. Xuanmin eyed Xue Xian on his shoulder. "Earlier, you told that rogue scholar ghost that you're still alive."

Xue Xian adjusted himself until he found a comfortable position, then he leaned back on his hands and dismissively replied, "Yeah, so it was wrong of you to capture me."

"Mm. Where is your original body?" Xuanmin asked.

Some people were just naturals when it came to hitting people's sore spots. Jiang Shining, that skinny reed, was one of them, and this bald donkey was one as well.

Just where was his original body? Even Xue Xian himself didn't know.

That day in Huameng County, Guangdong, someone had stripped him of his tendons and bones, then a torrential downpour had followed, causing the tides to surge. The towering waves swept him right into the sea. Consumed by unbearable agony, he lost consciousness. By the time he opened his eyes again, he found that his spirit had already left his body. Without the support of his spirit, his massive body couldn't maintain its form and shrank, transforming into a golden marble.

He'd hoped to hide that marble away and return to his body once his soul was sufficiently restored. Alas, the heavens played a cruel prank on him. While his mind was still in a haze, a large wave washed the marble ashore. Through the seawater, he could only watch as a fisherman picked it up. By the time he was fully conscious and ready to give chase, the man was gone.

Recalling the events made Xue Xian's temper flare, and his eventual answer was annoyed and clipped. "I'm still searching for it!"

Xuanmin looked askance at him again. *Losing your own body? Quite an impressive feat.*

Xue Xian wasn't being blasé about the matter. It was just that finding his body was a trivial issue compared to exacting revenge on the one who'd stripped him of his bones. He couldn't find his body because his vitality was greatly damaged, severing the connection between his spirit and physical form. Once he was fully recovered, he'd be able to sense its location. At that point, finding it would be child's play.

However, even though he wasn't actively searching for his body, that didn't mean he'd remain indifferent if it showed up by itself. Xue Xian recalled that droning noise and couldn't stop himself.

"The layout of this compound is a bit stran—"

But as Xue Xian was speaking, Xuanmin calmly walked across the main hall and passed through two narrow doors without running into any danger. When Xuanmin was about to open another narrow door, Xue Xian cut himself off and changed the subject. "Wait! Why does this place look familiar?"

No, it was more than just familiar. The ground paved with dark tiles, a house with an ornately carved door, an ancient tree peeking over the wall, snaking ivy… Wasn't this where Xue Xian had woken up earlier? So Xuanmin had taken him around and around, only to end up back at their original location?!

Xuanmin shook his head. "That place was fake. This is the real location."

Fine, Xue Xian thought, glancing sidelong at Xuanmin, *since he knows the Eight Gates well, he shouldn't have made any major mistakes in his calculations. I'll guess I'll accept whatever he says…for now.*

Xue Xian watched as Xuanmin stepped through the narrow doorway and made his way to the vacant building. "What's the use of finding the real location anyway?"

“This is the Life Gate,” Xuanmin said. “By leaving through here, we can break the array.”

Xue Xian was about to speak when, unexpectedly, he heard voices coming from the empty room—voices that shouldn’t have been there. Xuanmin immediately froze, pivoting on his toes to stealthily conceal himself behind a pillar, the paper figure still perched on his shoulder.

Why were there people here?

Chapter 6:
Bronze Mirror

XUE XIAN CAREFULLY PEEPED around the pillar from his perch on Xuanmin's shoulder. Fortunately, the paper doll was inconspicuous and easy to overlook. The voices, which sounded a little familiar, grew clearer. They waited until the door creaked open and a youth took a step through, his movements clumsy. Only then did Xue Xian realize that the voice belonged to Scribe Liu's son, Liu Chong.

Had they really managed to find someone else so effortlessly? Who was he speaking to, Jiang Shining?

But Xue Xian wasn't the type to jump to conclusions. He quickly sensed that something was amiss. While Liu Chong was still clad in a thick robe, it wasn't the one he'd been wearing earlier. The original one had been blue-gray, but he was now dressed in maroon. His sleeves were even trimmed with crimson, imparting a somewhat festive vibe.

As the thought crossed Xue Xian's mind, he saw Liu Chong turn around to help another person out the door. His movements were awkward —even the action of supporting someone required considerable effort on his part—but they also revealed the depths of his sincerity.

The person he was helping was an elderly woman with her hair in a bun. Her hair was white and sparse, her bun only a small, limp tuft on the back of her head. Her face was gaunt and full of deep-set wrinkles, the corners of her eyes drooping. There was a purplish hue to her lips that marked her as ill. She had one hand on Liu Chong's wrist, gripping it tightly the way a withered root clung to the earth. Her other hand rested on a dull wooden cane.

Despite the aid, she still struggled to step over the threshold. The elderly often had trouble lifting their legs, and it was obvious that the threshold was too high for her.

After a moment, the old lady finally stood outside. She supported herself with both hands on the cane and smiled at Liu Chong. "Chong-er is

so capable. Go inside and bring me a wooden stool."

Liu Chong nodded. When he stepped into the building, the old lady added, "Oh, bring the lanterns and the paper ingots as well."

Unfortunately, Liu Chong only had the capacity to focus on one thing at a time. The old lady had given him three instructions at once, which proved too complicated for him. He stood with one foot inside and the other outside, staring blankly at the lady as he struggled to articulate his words. "Wooden stool… Ingots?"

The old lady sighed almost soundlessly, then smiled at him. "Mm. Chong-er is so smart."

Liu Chong smiled foolishly in her direction and hurried into the room. Moments later, he emerged holding a wooden stool in one hand and a large cloth bag in the other. With both hands occupied, he seemed unsure how to step outside. He hesitated at the threshold for a moment before awkwardly stumbling out, then handed the stool and the bag to the old lady. He tried to help steady the stool and open the bag, but in his clumsiness, he almost toppled the stool and inadvertently pulled the cloth bag's knot too tight. It was hard to tell if he was genuinely helping or making more trouble.

However, the old lady showed no sign of impatience. She continued to smile at Liu Chong as she said, "Go back inside and get two lanterns."

Liu Chong, feeling commended, became even more enthusiastic. "Okay!" he said, before heading into the house and rummaging around. Not long after, he returned with two red lanterns.

"It's almost New Year's. Time to replace the white lanterns." The old lady instructed Liu Chong to swap the lanterns hanging over the door for the festive red ones, then sat back down on the wooden stool, squinting her eyes as she tugged on the knot he had tangled.

After a long while, she managed to loosen it. The bag opened, and the pile of paper ingots within spilled to the ground. The old lady carefully pulled a fire starter from her pocket. Using the flame of the white lantern to light the material inside, she tossed it onto the pile.

Warm yellow flames instantly roared to life, and the heap of ingots rapidly shriveled in the heat, as if the essence had been sucked out of them. One ingot in the corner escaped the flames and was caught by the wind instead. The gust blew it over to the pillar, and Xuanmin reached out, catching it in his hand.

He turned the ingot over. Sure enough, there were several characters written on the bottom. The messy handwriting identified it as Liu Chong's work.

Xue Xian leaned closer, squinting to decipher the writing. It seemed to be a name: *Liu Xian*. He recalled the illegible scribbles on the ingots in Liu Chong's room. Could they have said this name?

On further thought, that didn't seem right. The characters for *Liu Xian* were clear and legible, so why would they have been a jumbled mess on the ingots? Besides, those smudged ink stains had looked like more than two characters.

Having examined the writing on the ingot, Xuanmin let it go. The wind whisked the ingot back, where it caught the last flicker of flame and was completely consumed.

The old lady poked at the remnants of the embers with her cane and murmured, “My health hasn’t been good this year. I can’t move my waist anymore, so there are fewer paper ingots compared to last year. Use them the best you can.”

Liu Chong sat quietly on the threshold, listening. When he heard this, he dashed back into the house and returned with a small stack of yellow paper. Then he hunched over and began folding, mumbling, “I-I can. I’ll do it.”

The old lady turned to him. Under the firelight, her eyes shone warmly, but they also seemed a little anguished.

Liu Chong was awkward when it came to most things, but he was quite adept at folding paper ingots. He clearly helped out often. After folding one, he held it and smiled up at the old lady, his expression expectant, waiting for praise.

The old lady rewarded him with a glowing smile. “My Chong-er’s ingots are even better than mine.”

“Here.” Liu Chong handed the ingot to her, telling her to toss it into the dwindling fire.

The old lady waved her hands. “No rush. Save it for next time. It doesn’t have a name, so you shouldn’t burn it. If you did, how would they know who it belongs to? Your great-grandfather wouldn’t be able to take it.”

Liu Chong nodded thoughtfully, then lowered his head, earnestly folding a new one.

The old lady tapped her cane against the ground, extinguishing the scant sparks lingering there. When she was finished, she started poking at the ashes again, making sure that any paper at the bottom would burn completely too. As she worked the ashes, she began to recite, “With lots of money comes food and play. Gold and silver, be at peace today.”

As Liu Chong folded the money, he unconsciously echoed her words, muttering, “Food and play, gold…and silver, be at peace today.”

Soon, the entire stack of paper ingots had been reduced to ash. The old lady tapped her cane, then pulled Liu Chong back into the house. But he seemed to run into something; right after they went in, a loud crash like the sound of porcelain shattering echoed from inside.

“Don’t panic. It’s fine, it’s fine.” The old lady’s voice came faintly from within. Perhaps Liu Chong had scared himself with his mistake and she was rushing to console him.

Not long after, the old lady and Liu Chong reemerged from the house. She was using the front of her padded robe to carry a few pieces of broken porcelain, while Liu Chong held…

Xue Xian squinted from behind the pillar for a long time before he realized it was a small bronze mirror.

Why a bronze mirror? He was genuinely puzzled.

He watched as the old lady instructed Liu Chong to dig a hole at the old tree next to the courtyard wall. They placed the broken porcelain inside, then set the bronze mirror down beside it.

While they buried the mirror, the old lady murmured two more lines. “We place the mirror, changing misfortune to blessing. May they all rest in peace.”

After burying both the shards and the mirror, they reentered the house. Liu Chong may have been disabled, but he had some understanding of filial piety. He helped the old lady inside before stepping over the threshold himself.

Xue Xian turned and whispered to Xuanmin, “This Life Gate is so odd. Will it only let us go after playing through all these old memories?”

Xuanmin’s brows pinched. He raised a finger to his lips, telling Xue Xian to be quiet.

Too late. Liu Chong, who had just stepped inside, seemed to hear something. He poked his head back out, his expression puzzled. He just so happened to look at the pillar, meeting Xue Xian’s gaze.

Logically speaking, the paper doll was tiny—it would have been hard to make out its painted face from four inches away, let alone a distance of seven to eight paces. But Liu Chong really seemed to have seen him. Xue Xian couldn't tell if it was just his imagination, but Liu Chong's foolish eyes seemed to suddenly sharpen. Those black pupils fixed right on him, sending a chill down his spine.

Within seconds, the wind in the courtyard stilled, before blowing again from an entirely different direction. The abrupt change was indescribably eerie. Liu Chong stepped out, and from within the house came slow, lumbering footsteps, stiff yet shuffling, distinctly different from the old lady's gait.

Xuanmin stopped hiding behind the pillar. Right as Liu Chong stepped forward, the monk backed into the narrow door and quickly darted behind it.

The shuffling footsteps didn't stop—in fact, they drew closer.

Scanning the area around them, Xuanmin resolutely chose the corridor on the right. He cut diagonally across the courtyard, avoiding all the main buildings. Instead, he strode over to a narrow door in a corner.

Xue Xian clung to his robe with a death grip. "Why did things suddenly change?"

He couldn't resist stealing a glance backward, only to see the old lady and the young man following them through the first narrow door, their gait, posture, expressions, and movements imbued with a harsh, uncanny emptiness.

"I don't know why, but the Life Gate became the Death Gate," Xuanmin said, as he pushed open the second narrow door.

"So, the Eight Gates have changed from your initial calculations?"

"Mm."

"What happens if we accidentally enter the Death Gate?"

"All the hazards will be triggered, and similar things will happen at all the gates. We must not let those people see us. The moment they do, they'll pursue us."

Xue Xian recalled the immediate change in the old lady and young man's demeanors. "How long will they chase us?"

"Until we die," said Xuanmin.

With that, Xuanmin crossed over the threshold and stepped through the narrow door. This time, it led to a hall. For some reason, three or four maids were gathered around the table.

One of the maids said, "The old lady hasn't gotten any better. Her complexion is even worsening. Did that Jiang family prescribe the wrong medicine? Those quacks will get her killed!"

"No idea," another round-faced girl said. "We don't know anything about the prescriptions. We just have to take good care of her. I was really scared last night. She could barely breathe, but I found the courage to thump her back. The two of you are on watch tonight, aren't you? Monitor her carefully!"

Before she could finish, another maid rushed in, breathless. "Quick! Get to the back! The old lady might—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Xuanmin spun around and exited the narrow door. Xue Xian couldn't resist turning back for a glance, then slapped Xuanmin hard on the back. "They spotted us again! Hurry!"

As he spoke, the footsteps in the room abruptly changed direction, all pattering toward the narrow door. That was twice they'd opened a door to find themselves being chased by a bunch of bizarre entities. How great was that?!

Just then, Xuanmin pivoted to arrive at narrow door number three, completely undaunted.

Hey, Wise One, can you think first before opening another door?! Xue Xian screamed to himself.

At its core, Scribe Liu's residence was a standard rectangular compound. The more one cared about feng shui, the less they could employ bizarre or outrageous designs. Although there were doors and walls everywhere, the eight cardinal directions still reigned supreme: east, west, south, north, southeast, southwest, northeast, and northwest. These eight

cardinal directions corresponded precisely to the Eight Gates of the Qimen Dunjia: Initiation, Repose, Life, Injury, Obstruction, Scenery, Fright, and Death.

Of the Eight Gates, Initiation, Repose, and Life were usually auspicious, while Death, Fright, and Injury were calamitous. Scenery and Obstruction were neutral. For Xue Xian and Xuanmin, they could safely exit the array as long as they found the Life Gate.

But while the Eight Gates were simple to calculate in a static environment, things became troublesome if they were to shift for any reason. This was what plagued Xue Xian and Xuanmin now. The Life Gate they'd pinpointed had inexplicably transformed into the Death Gate. Not only was it no longer an exit, it had also released a horde of bizarre, dangerous entities.

Nonetheless, Xuanmin opened the new door without hesitation. Xue Xian didn't even have the time to stop him.

If it'd been up to the old, able-bodied Xue Xian, he would have thought, *Eight Gates, Smeight Gates! To hell with that Life, Death, Fright, or Injury nonsense! I'll open them all. Let's see if they can stop me from leaving! If it still doesn't work, I'll blast them all with lightning!*

He'd had immense confidence in his power. There was no way he'd fall victim to such childish tricks.

Things were different now. Xuanmin was the one calling the shots, and Xue Xian was only a sheet of paper clinging to his shoulder. He hadn't known Xuanmin for long—only a couple of hours. After these scant few interactions, Xue Xian was still in the dark about how powerful the monk actually was. He acted like a high priest, and sometimes he was quite good at intimidating others with his gambits. However, Xue Xian hadn't seen him do anything substantial yet. For example, could he summon rain or thunder? Could he offer rest to wandering ghosts like Jiang Shining? When it came down to it, could he beat the array's tiny old lady (possibly a vengeful spirit) in a fight?

Seriously. Not to put too fine a point on it, but could he beat the array's tiny old lady (definitely a vengeful spirit) in a fight?!

Xue Xian had his doubts. After all, Xuanmin needed to use copper scraps to capture ghosts. He asked himself, *Have you ever seen a high monk who caught demons by scooping them up?* And then he answered his own question: *Never!*

Xuanmin knit his brows and shot the grumbling paper doll on his shoulder a quick glance. His slender, attractive fingers rested upon the door. Previously, he'd shown some restraint while opening the doors, keeping the action whisper-silent. Now, he seemed to throw caution to the wind. He unceremoniously threw the door open, and the crimson door struck the wall with bang.

Just as Xuanmin was about to step through, he noticed that Xue Xian was moving again, quietly climbing down his robe without a word. He clambered away from the high view he had whined for, wordlessly returning to the pouch at Xuanmin's waist. Hanging his head in resignation for a moment, he slid along the seams and into the pouch. He even docilely pulled the pouch's opening shut.

This sequence of events conveyed a very clear message: *Go dig your grave by yourself. I'm not participating.*

Xuanmin had nothing to say to that.

Behind this narrow door he had opened lay a square courtyard. Its north and south led to the front and middle halls respectively, and it was flanked by two corridors. Strangely, the loud noise Xuanmin had made while opening the door hadn't alerted anyone inside.

Xue Xian sat in the hidden pouch, chin in hand. He waited for a moment, but he heard no approaching footsteps. Unable to contain his curiosity, he peeked out.

There were no ghostly figures in the courtyard. It was eerily quiet, except for the faint laughter drifting in from the front hall. It sounded like Scribe Liu. Xue Xian's opinion of Scribe Liu was deep in the negatives, but he was a little interested in what was happening in the front hall.

While Xue Xian pondered, Xuanmin stepped through the door. He made his way along the corridor to the front hall's back door.

That door didn't offer a view into the hall because a large partition stood before them, blocking their line of sight. Entering the hall would require walking around it. Xue Xian watched as the brainless, fearless Xuanmin walked through the door and placed himself behind the partition. Here, the conversation in the front hall could be heard with clarity.

Xue Xian couldn't tell how many people were in the hall, but only two were speaking. One of them was Scribe Liu, while the other seemed to be an elderly guest, judging by his hoarse voice and slow speech.

"Recently, the townsfolk have been talking about a rumor," the old man said. "I don't know if it's true."

"What rumor?" asked Scribe Liu.

"The incident of the fire at the Jiang family clinic. Have you heard anything about it, old friend?"

"Of course, of course." For some reason, Scribe Liu's words were oddly stiff. He repeated himself several times before raising his teacup and taking a sip. Then he clicked his tongue and sighed. "The county office has taken care of the bodies. They were charred beyond recognition. I wouldn't have believed they were human bodies if the coroner hadn't said so."

"I still remember when I came to this town many years ago and had the fortune of meeting Doctor Jiang. Never did I imagine… Haaah!" The old man sighed. "But everyone in town says the Jiang family misdiagnosed your mother and prescribed the wrong medicine, which led to her passing."

Scribe Liu picked up the teacup and drank another mouthful. The sound of his swallowing was so loud even Xue Xian could hear it. It seemed as if there were a tempest broiling inside Scribe Liu. After gulping down two more mouthfuls of tea, he slammed the cup back onto the table with sudden vigor. "Don't bring this up again! The Jiang family have received their retribution. I won't hold that against them anymore! I only feel sorry for my poor mother. She worked so hard most of her life and had just managed to enjoy a few years of happiness, yet…"

Seeing Scribe Liu so agitated, the old man quickly consoled him. "All right, let's not talk about it. Quack doctors bring great harm!"

Xue Xian frowned at those words. He recalled the day he entered the Jiang family's dilapidated residence.

The vast courtyard had been littered with broken tiles, choked by overgrown weeds, and shrouded in an eerie silence. It'd been daytime, with no lack of sun. Yet an oppressive sorrow hung in the air, never dissipating. Carried into the courtyard by the wind, he happened to come face-to-face with Jiang Shining, who was sitting in a corner. Only then did Xue Xian realize that the sorrow was emanating from the rogue ghost. Unfortunately, Jiang Shining was in a fog. He could recall the events of his life, but nothing after his death.

"Why are you bunkered here?" Xue Xian had asked. "You should reincarnate if you're dead. If you keep wasting time, you'll miss your chance and never be able to."

Jiang Shining looked bewildered for a moment, then said, "Oh, I'm waiting for my parents. We'll go together. They're getting on in years, so I need to take care of them."

Xue Xian was sure that this ghost must have fried his brain reading too many books, since everything he said was nonsense.

"Okay, so where are they?" Xue Xian asked, grimacing.

Jiang Shining sighed. "They probably went the wrong way, but I don't have a proper body, so I can't leave this courtyard to look for them."

Xue Xian stared at him for a while before saying, "Very well. I'll agree to lend you a hand. But on one condition."

"Say it." Jiang Shining was frank.

"Let me stay here for a few days."

After Xue Xian provided Jiang Shining with a paper body, he started searching for his parents in town every night. After three days, he'd scoured the entire town twice over, but found nothing.

At that time, Xue Xian thought that Jiang Shining's parents had already left for the afterlife. However, after he listened to Scribe Liu's words, a new idea began to take shape in Xue Xian's mind. Right as he

went to climb back onto Xuanmin's shoulder to tell him his thoughts, the two people in the hall spoke again.

"By the way," he heard Scribe Liu say, "I nearly forgot. I mentioned that I received a rare item and wanted to show it to you, didn't I? Let's go to the back."

Xue Xian poked Xuanmin. But with the feebleness of his paper body, it felt more like a tickle than a poke. Xuanmin frowned slightly at the evil spirit tickling his side.

Before Xuanmin could leave through the door, he abruptly noticed someone standing next to him.

This newcomer's eyes were unusually dark, devoid of any light, lending him a haunted look. Two dark shadows curved under his eyes, and his ashen complexion had a greenish tinge. His appearance out of the blue was more than a little unsettling. An ordinary person who turned around to see this ghostly sight would have jumped right into the rafters in fear.

However, Xuanmin and Xue Xian were no ordinary people. One was brazen and audacious, while the other was unflappable and implacable, having gone through his entire life without knowing fear. Both the walking glacier monk and the evil spirit hiding by his waist turned their expressionless faces to look at the interloper.

His face grew even greener as he leaned back and held his chest. "Why did you suddenly turn around? You scared me to death."

Both Xuanmin and Xue Xian blinked at him, and Xuanmin lifted his hand. This bookworm standing in front of them—none other than Jiang Shining—really had fried his brain with reading.

Seeing him, Xue Xian grew a little worried. If Jiang Shining had heard what Scribe Liu said, he might just start brawling with him in the front hall. Could this reed even take on those two geezers? Yet Jiang Shining's tone seemed to indicate he was ignorant of the conversation about his parents.

Xue Xian was somewhat relieved; at least he didn't have to worry about Jiang Shining dashing out to dig his own grave (again). He leaned out

of the pouch and waved disdainfully, trying to shoo the ghost away. “Turn around. Let’s get going.”

“Why the rush?” Jiang Shining asked.

Despite his occasional retort to Xue Xian, Jiang Shining was soft-natured at heart. It was this softness that carried him through days of tirelessly playing Xue Xian’s gofer, enduring ridicule while keeping him quiet with food. Even as Jiang Shining questioned Xue Xian, the former’s body was already following the latter’s instructions. He turned around and stepped through the door despite his baffled expression.

At this turn of events, Xuanmin dropped his hand, only to hear Xue Xian say, “What did you raise your hand for, you bald donkey? Did you grow sick of this bookworm’s stupidity? Were you going to beat him up?”

You’re the one who deserves a beating, Xuanmin thought.

Jiang Shining was flabbergasted. “Wait, what did I do? Why hit me?”

“Just keep walking. Enough nonsense from you,” Xue Xian said.

To think such a troublemaker had the nerve to tell others to shut up.

However, Xue Xian wasn’t entirely incorrect about Xuanmin’s intentions. A ghost who took human form by possessing an object like paper was sustained by a tiny wisp of yin energy. There was a vital acupoint about four inches down on the back of the head; if someone struck this point, the yin energy sustaining the ghost would disperse, and they’d return to their original form. Worried that Jiang Shining might cause a mess with his presence, Xuanmin had been on the verge of forcing him back into paper form for easier transport. After all, having a single insolent paraplegic on his hands was enough. Wouldn’t a second hanger-on who had full use of his limbs just result in chaos?

But Jiang Shining seemed surprisingly cooperative. Easing off for now, Xuanmin decided to tolerate the ghost and followed him out the door.

Once they were through, Xuanmin grabbed the back of Jiang Shining’s collar, pivoted on his toes, and pulled him to hide behind the narrow wall separating the corridor from the side of the building. As long as he desired it, Xuanmin could keep his steps whisper-silent. His acolyte’s

robes were thin and light, and their hems brushed over a withered twig and grazed the wall behind it, until the fabric fell back in place around his ankles. Despite everything, his robes remained spotless and free of mud, and the twig didn't so much as twitch.

Xue Xian swept his eyes over the wall and motionless twig, then looked at the copper coins dangling from the monk's waist.

He's truly enigmatic, Xue Xian thought.

Xuanmin had hidden them just in time. Right as the edge of his robe fell back behind the wall, Scribe Liu and his friend exited through the back door. Both men were getting on in years—their hearing was no longer sharp, so neither of them noticed anything was amiss.

Jiang Shining caught sight of Scribe Liu's back from his spot behind the wall. Despite his unhappiness at seeing him, he was also a little confused. Why was Xuanmin avoiding Scribe Liu like the man was trouble he didn't wish to waste time on?

Fortunately, Jiang Shining was deeply afraid of inconveniencing others. He never spoke out of turn, never acted on impulse, and never created trouble for anyone else. Swallowing all his questions, he stayed behind the wall and hardly dared to breathe as he watched Scribe Liu and the stranger pass through the courtyard into the main hall.

Just as Scribe Liu was about to step through the door, a somewhat muffled voice rang out. "Dad?"

From their hiding place, Xue Xian said dully, "Fantastic, the real fool's here. Such great timing."

Sure enough, Liu Chong had found his way here. He stood beneath the eaves of the corridor as he called out to Scribe Liu.

The first thing Xue Xian did was inspect what Liu Chong was wearing. The young man they'd met at the Death Gate earlier had been wearing a robe of maroon, but the one standing in the corridor was wearing a padded gray-blue robe, just like the one they'd met before entering the array.

Without warning, Xuanmin stepped out of the gap where he was hiding. Before Scribe Liu could react, Xuanmin had already leaped in front of Liu Chong. He didn't even have the chance to scream before he was dragged toward a narrow door.

Fortunately, the courtyard was quite small—the door was only a few steps away from the narrow wall, and Xuanmin reached it in a flash. Scribe Liu, who'd been frozen in front of the main hall, snapped back to his senses. His expression changed as he surged into action.

But Xuanmin was faster. With a spin and a step, he was already behind the door.

Bang!

Xuanmin slammed the door closed. Without a second thought, Jiang Shining latched it shut. He then looked up at Liu Chong, who was still in a daze, and gasped in surprise.

"What are you so shocked about?" Xue Xian snapped.

"Why has the mole on his face changed places?" Jiang Shining pointed at Liu Chong before realizing how rude that was and pulling back his hand. "Wasn't it on the left before? Why did it move to the right?"

Doesn't he realize those words make no sense?!

Jiang Shining could not help shivering as he spoke. Xue Xian peeked out, caught sight of Jiang Shining's trembling, and decided he was done with this bookworm. What kind of ghost feared ghosts?!

Xuanmin's brows knitted, then relaxed. "I understand."

"Are you kidding?! You don't understand *shit*!" cried Xue Xian.

He was an impatient person by nature, yet now he was stuck with the slow-witted Jiang Shining. Xuanmin was even worse—the type who wouldn't run even if the sky came crashing down! Xue Xian felt like he'd aged ten years in an instant. Thoroughly out of patience, Xue Xian flipped out of the pouch to latch onto Liu Chong's pants. In the blink of an eye, he'd disappeared under Liu Chong's padded robe.

This sequence of sounds brought Liu Chong back to reality. Jiang Shining looked up and met Liu Chong's gaze. His eyes were large and unfocused, devoid of life. The effect was dreadfully uncanny. Staring straight at them could make anyone wet their pants.

Alarmed, Jiang Shining backed away. What he didn't realize was that ghosts were not so different from stray dogs. One might refrain from biting you while you were standing still, but it would attack the moment you moved.

Letting out a low growl, Liu Chong lunged at Jiang Shining.

The bookworm's face twisted with fear. He started to scream, then forced it back down, still unable to abandon the "gentleman's decorum" delineated within his books. He wanted to run but feared looking disgraceful. With one foot braced to jump while the other remained planted in place, he practically twisted himself into a knot.

With a thump, the uncoordinated Jiang Shining finally lived up to expectations and fell to the ground in a heap. With no other options, he used his hands to scuttle backward.

The Liu Chong conjured by the array had the same clumsiness as the real Liu Chong—every move was slow and lumbering, yet full of terrifying strength. Jiang Shining watched as that creature sprang at him. He gasped and shrank back, squeezing his eyes shut.

There was a muffled thud. Air gusted over Jiang Shining's face and the tiles beneath his feet shook. Somehow, no cold fingers wrapped around his neck.

Cautiously opening his eyes, Jiang Shining found Liu Chong sprawled on the ground, having inexplicably fallen face-first. He hadn't expected to stumble, and his slow reaction time meant he'd failed to catch himself with his hands, landing solidly on his face.

Jiang Shining was stunned for a few moments, then he scrambled to his feet and shook the dirt from his clothes, his eyes wide with disbelief. As he looked down, he saw Xue Xian sliding out from beneath Liu Chong's robe, holding a strip of cloth that suspiciously resembled…

A belt?

Jiang Shining did a double take and realized why Liu Chong was on the ground: His pants had fallen to his ankles mid-lunge, tripping him. Liu Chong was already uncoordinated; with his pants sagging, he'd taken a nasty tumble. Because he'd hit his forehead, he lay flat and showed no signs of coming to.

Xue Xian tossed the belt at Jiang Shining's face. "Don't just stand there! Tie his hands and feet together!" Then, he turned to Xuanmin with a look of disdain. "Pick me up already. Come on now. I almost tore my arm off getting rid of that thing."

Pick me up? Jiang Shining could hardly believe his ears. *What kind of paraplegic spends his day jumping and bouncing around?*

Then, Jiang Shining suddenly realized he must have been a burden who'd brought this trouble on them, and he grew ashamed. Without agonizing over whether removing someone's belt went against his gentleman's decorum, he tied Liu Chong's left hand to his right foot.

"Sorry," Jiang Shining mumbled.

Xue Xian scoffed, thinking Jiang Shining ridiculous. To help these assholes escape danger, he'd been forced to denigrate himself by removing someone's belt, all while dragging around two useless legs. Xuanmin should have fallen to his knees and picked him up with both hands before putting him back in his proper spot, but he was still standing there, completely oblivious.

Useless bastard! Xue Xian glared up at Xuanmin, wanting to stare some guilt into him. Instead, he saw Xuanmin's left hand hovering over the coins at his waist, clearly about to unfasten them for some purpose. Could it be? Had Xuanmin been about to take matters in his own hands?!

Xuanmin had never thought of removing someone's belt to subdue them, nor had he foreseen such a development, so he'd been taken aback until he recovered from the shock.

Xue Xian watched intently—until Xuanmin drew his fingers away from the coin string and picked up Xue Xian to return him to the pouch.

Xue Xian immediately regretted his actions. Had he known Xuanmin would act, he wouldn't have rushed to remove Liu Chong's belt. Perhaps he would have gotten to see just what Xuanmin was made of! Feeling the loss of his chance, Xue Xian deflated, his paper body going limp and his head drooping like a hanged man's as he dangled from the pouch's opening.

Xuanmin frowned, certain that Xue Xian was up to something. His fingers brushed over the paper head dangling from his pouch. When his fingers touched the material, the flimsy head rose just a little. The moment he let go, however, it flopped back down.

After silently fiddling with the paper doll for a while, Xuanmin concluded that Xue Xian was probably suffering from some malady. Shaking his head, Xuanmin said to Jiang Shining, "Let's go."

Right then, the narrow door rattled as Scribe Liu started ramming into it from the other side. After two slams, the latch began to loosen.

Bang, bang!

Jiang Shining shuddered hard at the noise and rushed after Xuanmin.

They navigated the labyrinthine courtyard, taking several doors along the way and running into more than one group of people. The moment the people saw them, they broke from acting out their roles and lines. Ghostly energy enveloped them and they started howling as they moved—some fast, some slow as they trailed after them like kites.

Jiang Shining turned a corner and fled through a door, his heart thumping as he counted their pursuers. Among them were maids and servants he didn't recognize, three different Scribe Lius, two Liu Chongs, and two Old Lady Lius gripping wooden canes. Two unfamiliar, frail-looking maids tore apart an entire tree in their way while giving chase. It was true that the tree was old, withered, and on the brink of death, but to tear it apart regardless? Were their fingers as sharp as knives?!

Jiang Shining shuddered in fear at the memory. He'd woken up alone in an empty room earlier. After going through two narrow doors, he'd run into Xue Xian and Xuanmin immediately. That had been a bout of incredible luck.

Fortunately, Xuanmin remained quite composed. He walked swiftly, but there was no sign of panic or anxiety on his face. He seemed to know what he was doing as he moved through each door without a shred of hesitation. Jiang Shining didn't think he had a terrible sense of direction, but he still found himself thoroughly disoriented after all the twists and turns. Meanwhile, Xuanmin remained alert and focused.

As if coming back to life, Xue Xian suddenly lifted his head and asked, "Bald donkey, where are we heading?"

"First to the Death Gate, then the Life Gate."

"If I'm not blind, this is the third time we've been in this courtyard." Xue Xian's voice was skeptical.

"This is the Obstruction Gate," Xuanmin explained.

"So?"

"Look behind you."

Xue Xian raised his drooping head and turned around, only to see a swath of white fabric. "Are you mocking me? The only thing behind me is your raggedy monk's robe."

Xuanmin didn't answer.

Jiang Shining also gazed back at these words. He took a few quick steps before noticing something. "What happened to the people behind us? Where did they go? I just heard them howling like hungry wolves a moment ago."

Xue Xian finally understood what Xuanmin meant. "You were trying to shake them off?"

"Mm."

Scenery and Obstruction, the two neutral gates among the eight, weren't without purpose. The Obstruction Gate was a place of concealment and thus the most suitable location to hide in and take refuge. Having passed through it three times, Xuanmin had successfully shaken off everyone who'd been chasing them. He then spun around and exited the

courtyard through a narrow door in the southwest before striding down a long corridor.

"Isn't that the Death Gate we stumbled into earlier?" Xue Xian was puzzled when he saw Xuanmin open the narrow door in the corridor's corner and push Jiang Shining inside.

"The Death Gate is known as the path of ghosts. It's auspicious for you."

Startled by being pushed, Jiang Shining staggered through the door and into the courtyard.

During their previous jaunt here, Xue Xian and Xuanmin had led the specters of Liu Chong and Old Lady Liu away. The place was completely empty, with not so much as a shadow other than Jiang Shining.

The moment Jiang Shining stepped into the courtyard, he vanished like a puff of smoke.

"What, he left the array?" asked Xue Xian.

Xuanmin nodded and took another series of twists and turns, making a beeline for the Life Gate.

When they reached it, Xue Xian found the Life Gate's location even more familiar.

"Isn't this Liu Chong's run-down little shack?" Xue Xian examined the gloomy little shed at the end of the stone path in disbelief that a location so ominous could be linked to the Life Gate. "I'd believe you more if you said it was the Death Gate."

"It used to be," said Xuanmin. "However, the Liu residence got inverted, so the Death Gate became the Life Gate."

"What do you mean?" Xue Xian said with a frown. He recalled what Jiang Shining said earlier about the mole on Liu Chong's cheek changing positions. It'd moved to the right from its original position on the left. A thought flashed through his mind. "Then… A mirror?"

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian's paper head. He might have been a troublemaker, but he wasn't stupid. "In the Liu residence, the Death Gate was located at the southwest house, the Initiation Gate at the main house in the northwest, and the Life Gate at the northeast."

That was right. Xuanmin had asked Scribe Liu about that when they were standing at the entrance of Liu Chong's room—the northwest house was Scribe Liu's, while the northeast house was where his youngest son, Liu Jin, lived.

Among the Eight Gates, the Initiation Gate came first, symbolizing the establishment of a successful career. Scribe Liu aspired to rise in the ranks, so he naturally placed himself at the Initiation Gate. The Life Gate symbolized vitality and reproduction. Placing his young son there ensured his safety and smooth sailing through life. This way, Scribe Liu could rest assured about his successor.

Suddenly, Xue Xian understood why Scribe Liu had used the precept "Drawing the River to the Sea." Poor Liu Chong, slow-witted and foolish, was completely ignorant of the world. He'd lived for twenty-odd years, but folding palm-sized paper ingots was probably the one thing he was good at. Using this meager skill of his, he'd heaped his room full of filial sincerity. In his desire to be impartial, he'd even divided them into groups and labeled them.

Gold and silver, be at peace today…

Back when Scribe Liu had been a child, had Old Lady Liu also burned ingots with him and said those words to him? But even if she had, he'd probably forgotten them all, or he would not have had the heart to cast aside his disabled son the way one might an old shoe.

Drawing the river to the sea. Liu Chong was the river. The Liu family was the sea.

However, Scribe Liu probably didn't realize the precision a feng shui layout required. A single change could reverse yin and yang, turning misfortunes into blessings and blessings into misfortunes. The bronze mirror that Old Lady Liu and Liu Chong had buried beneath the ancient tree

—“Change misfortune to blessing. May they all rest in peace”—had become that variable.

Thus, the Eight Gates had inverted, and the Death Gate became the Life Gate.

As they drew closer to that gloomy shack, the narrow door leading to the main house creaked again.

By this point, Xue Xian was already numb to all these unexpected noises. *Surely it isn’t another Liu Chong?* he thought.

He leaned over Xuanmin’s waist for a glimpse, only to see that, sure enough, it was Liu Chong again!

“There’s no end to this!” Xue Xian’s temper flared. He raised his arms, ready to escape the pouch, but stopped himself halfway. Glancing sideways at the string of copper coins hanging from Xuanmin’s waist, Xue Xian realized this was his chance!

He bit his tongue before looping his hands around the string of coins. Pushing them into Xuanmin’s hands, Xue Xian looked up at him. “What are you waiting for?!”

Xuanmin pressed Xue Xian back down with a finger. “No rush. His mole is on the left cheek.”

Xue Xian was so angry he could barely breathe. He hung his head like an overcooked noodle against the pouch’s opening once more.

This instance of Liu Chong was as Xuanmin said: His mole was on his left cheek, and his robe was the grayish-blue one they’d seen that morning. From head to toe, there were no anomalies present. This was the real deal.

When Liu Chong came through the narrow door, his expression was three parts confused and seven parts frustrated. He stepped over the threshold while sneaking glances behind him, lumbering forward two steps before catching sight of Xuanmin.

He froze for a moment, then his face fell, his eyebrows pinching into a neat frown. “I just saw…saw Grandma…” As he spoke, he pointed outside the narrow door. “Right there.”

Grandma? Wasn't that Old Lady Liu?

They'd only just shaken off their pursuers; surely this fool hadn't brought them more?! Xue Xian, who'd been dangling in resignation, suddenly snapped back up and looked Liu Chong. "Where is she?"

"I chased after her. She left." Liu Chong's face was heavy with sorrow, his tone anxious. He didn't even realize that the question hadn't come from Xuanmin. "She didn't look at me. I can't find her. No matter how I try, I can't."

He wrung his hands, miserable and dejected. He stared longingly out the narrow door. After a long while, he spoke again. "I want to talk to Grandma…"

Xue Xian pondered what Scribe Liu and his friend had said earlier. Old Lady Liu must have passed away; according to the rumors, her death was a result of malpractice by Jiang Shining's parents. After Old Lady Liu's death, the Jiang family clinic had caught fire and burned down. Jiang Shining died three years ago, so Old Lady Liu must have been dead for at least three years as well.

Liu Chong had a one-track mind. If he expressed a desire for something, it must be something he yearned for day and night. For him, the past three years had been excruciatingly long and lonely.

"Let's go." Xuanmin waved at him, then turned and headed toward Liu Chong's ramshackle residence without waiting.

Perhaps Xuanmin's high-monk aura was too intimidating, or maybe it was the way he simply turned and left—either way, Liu Chong rushed after him without thinking.

"I-I want to look for Grandma!" Liu Chong stammered as he stumbled to catch up with Xuanmin.

Even Xue Xian couldn't resist cajoling him at first. "Hey now, what's the rush? Let's get back to the house first."

Liu Chong fidgeted for a while before muttering, "I'm still worried."

"Deal with it!" Xue Xian was blunt this time.

Liu Chong stared at Xuanmin's icy profile for a moment, looking a little scared. He endured a couple of steps, then mustered the courage to ask, "Why do you always speak with your mouth closed?"

Xuanmin just silently stared at Liu Chong.

"It's ventriloquism," Xue Xian lied with a straight face. "Uh, basically, I can speak from my stomach."

Liu Chong's eyes slowly swiveled over, his gaze falling on Xuanmin's abdomen. He had nothing to add, apparently.

In the span of their short conversation, they'd arrived at the building entrance. As long as they passed through its door, they'd be able to leave the array. Xuanmin showed no hesitation. He raised his foot decisively, then grabbed the unsettled Liu Chong.

Liu Chong stumbled forward, and one of his feet landed over the threshold. Just as his other foot was about to cross, a knocking sound drifted over—the sound of something striking the courtyard tiles.

"Huh?" This was probably the fastest Liu Chong had ever reacted in his life. He instantly froze and cried out, "Grandma!" Tugging back his half-raised foot, he turned around and dashed back out the door.

"Hey, wait!" Xue Xian called after him.

Xuanmin lifted an arm, ready to haul Liu Chong back, but when he did so a muffled drone echoed in Xue Xian's head. His vision darkened, and the world seemed to spin.

When Xue Xian came back to his senses, the scene before him had completely changed. They were standing by the door of Liu Chong's shack with Jiang Shining's pale face in front of them—but Liu Chong had vanished.

It was clear they'd escaped the array. And, at the last moment before their escape, Liu Chong had pulled back, thus remaining trapped inside.

Chapter 7:
Empty Millstone

"YOU FINALLY MADE IT OUT…" Jiang Shining let out a sigh of relief upon seeing them safe and sound. However, halfway through his sigh, he tensed again. "But where are Liu-dagongzi[3] and Scribe Liu? Are they still trapped inside?"

Xuanmin nodded, then entered the inner chambers without a second word.

Since he didn't speak, Jiang Shining was too afraid to say anything. He slowly trailed after Xuanmin and stood in the doorway in front of the inner chambers, watching as the monk crouched at the copper nails and talismans that'd been hammered into the floor.

Jiang Shining knew nothing about these things, but Xue Xian did. He had a shallow understanding of what was going on. To break through an array, there were two methods: from the inside or from the outside. Those inside needed to find the exit, but if you were outside of the array and wanted to free those trapped inside, the simplest method was to destroy it.

Destroying arrays was also a skill. After all, those who made a living handling ghosts and spirits relied on setting and breaking arrays to survive. If they were that easy to break, how would they earn any money?

When Xue Xian saw Xuanmin squat before the talismans, he perked up immediately, leaning forward with wide eyes. He was eager to see how Xuanmin would break the formation and what kind of skills he'd display.

He's reaching, he's reaching out! Xue Xian thought.

He kept his gaze fixed on Xuanmin's outstretched hand as it approached the talisman. Slowly, he grasped one of the copper nails.

Xue Xian held his breath as he quietly speculated. *Is he going to cut his hand and draw blood? Or perhaps use some kind of finger technique?*

Then…Xuanmin gripped the half-buried nail hard and yanked it right out of the ground while casually tearing the yellow talisman stuck to it.

Next…he yanked out the second nail and ripped the second talisman. Same with the third.

That was it.

Xue Xian silently watched Xuanmin destroy the copper nails and talismans in the most mundane way possible before nonchalantly wiping his hands. A mournful despondence swept over Xue Xian, as if he'd just drunk from the waters of the underworld, and he grew limp again. He had no idea if Xuanmin's fellow charlatans would want to die after witnessing this scene, but Xue Xian himself did, at least a little.

After that, Xuanmin stood up and went to the outer chambers. Sweeping a glance across the table, he found a fire starter in a corner. He struck it against the wall, lit a small flame, then burned the three talismans to cinders.

Meanwhile, Xue Xian was too busy contemplating death to watch the scene as it unfolded. Judging from Xuanmin's actions, the array was already broken. Soon enough, they would hear that fool Liu Chong and his whimpering.

However, fifteen minutes later, neither Liu Chong nor Scribe Liu had appeared. Xue Xian craned his neck to look outside the door, then eyed the inner chambers. Aside from Jiang Shining, there was neither hide nor hair of anyone else.

It hadn't worked? Was Xuanmin just messing with them?

From what they'd seen, the oppressive yin energy within this house had two causes: First was the "Drawing the River to the Sea" layout; second was its status as the Death Gate's location. Now the Death Gate had transformed into the Life Gate, and the array had been destroyed by Xuanmin in the crudest way possible, yet the yin energy showed no signs of dissipating.

Outside the shack, the morning light was luminous as it poured into the Liu residence from the east. But the fire-prevention wall blotted out some of the rays, casting darkness over the front of the building. Half of the roof lay under the sun, while the other half remained in shadow, like the intersection of yin and yang.

"Hahhh…"

Xue Xian raised his head to look at Jiang Shining. "What are you sighing for all of a sudden? You're not the one trapped in the array."

Jiang Shining blinked, guileless. "I didn't sigh. Wasn't that you?"

"Of course not! I never sigh. Why would I depress myself?"

Both of them fell silent as they stared at each other, before they slowly swiveled to look at Xuanmin.

"Hahhh…"

That quiet sigh came again, but Xuanmin hadn't opened his mouth. Even if he had, they still wouldn't have thought him the source of the sound—it was long-drawn and fretful as it trailed off. A feeble sigh, like the sound of someone elderly. There was no way it could have come from Xuanmin.

"Sounds like an old lady," Xue Xian surmised.

"Say, it doesn't really sound like a sigh, does it?" Jiang Shining gestured animatedly as he spoke. "More like someone when they're exhausted… Maybe a frail old person after traveling a long distance or carrying something heavy. When they can't catch their breath, that's the sound they make. Like a sigh, but not exactly the same." He thought for another moment, then added, "The breathing is weak and spent. They're ill."

"You can glean all that from listening to a sigh?" Xue Xian eyed him in disbelief.

Jiang Shining waved his hand. "If my parents were still alive, they'd be able to glean even more."

“Oh,” said Xue Xian. He didn’t say more, but his mind was racing. An old lady? Panting in exhaustion? While ill? Now that Jiang Shining had said so, it really did seem like the case. Remembering something, Xue Xian raised a flimsy hand and started hitting Xuanmin. Worried that he wasn’t striking hard enough, he also threw in some words: “Oi! Bald donkey! Look at me!”

Xuanmin looked down.

After a moment, Xue Xian stifled his emotions and waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind. Better if you don’t look. Point your eyeballs somewhere else.”

This was the first time Xuanmin had heard someone tell him that. Xue Xian was truly an unreasonable evil spirit.

What Xuanmin didn’t know was that Xue Xian had gotten used to his existence as a dragon. He was always the one looking down on others, quite literally, while no one ever looked down on him. He could accept the occasional downward glance from Xuanmin, but being scrutinized from above by his gaze? Xue Xian couldn’t take it. Dragons were proud creatures, and he felt his pride was especially important at times like these.

However, Xuanmin didn’t withdraw his gaze. He continued to stare as if playing contrarian.

This bastard! Xue Xian thought.

He used that unpleasant, wide-eyed corpse look of his to send a fake smile to Xuanmin, then rolled his eyes.

Finally, when that didn’t work, Xue Xian turned around and spoke with his back to Xuanmin. “I wanted to talk about Old Lady Liu. Have you ever heard of a particularly inhumane method used to protect houses? I first heard about it while mingling with humans. They said that when an elderly person passes, burying them beneath the home can bless the descendants with long-lasting fortune.”

What son would ever come up with something so disgusting? The scholar Jiang Shining was struck speechless, feeling like all the morality and ethics he’d studied for the past dozen years had been ground into dust.

“I have heard of that,” Xuanmin said in a low tone. “It’s called ‘Building Yang Over Yin.’ The soul trapped beneath the compound is refined into a yin spirit that guards the home. When combined with a feng shui array, the effects are remarkable.”

As he spoke, another trembling sigh rang out. The first two sighs had been faint, almost nonexistent, but this one was much clearer. Clear enough that they could tell its source.

Xuanmin’s gaze swept over a corner to his right, and he walked over to it.

An enormous number of paper ingots were strewn over the floor, covering most of it. This had prevented them from noticing any potential tricks in the flooring.

Xuanmin crouched down in the corner. From here, he could see the wooden cabinet within the inner chambers that had been facing the copper nails and talismans. He swept the ingots away and curled his pointer finger, then tapped the ground twice.

Tap, tap.

The sound echoed, indicating there was space underneath.

“It’s hollow!” Xue Xian and Jiang Shining exclaimed together.

Xuanmin spotted a crack in the wall. Following that crack with his eyes led him to a narrow four-way crack shaped like a cross. It just so happened to be on a stone slab around the size of four hands.

“This crack…” Jiang Shining reached out to test it. “Fingers won’t fit.”

All four sides of the crack were exceedingly tight—too narrow to fit human fingers, meaning that they couldn’t force it open with their hands. If the stone slab couldn’t be pried open, they’d never learn what lay underneath.

Xue Xian looked at Jiang Shining’s pale, ghostly hand, then at Xuanmin’s slender, fair one. Finally, he said reluctantly, “Fine. I guess I’m the only one who’ll fit. I’ll deign to slide myself inside and give it a push.”

“I’ll deign”? This genius truly has no concept of shame, Jiang Shining thought.

His declaration finished, Xue Xian made an exaggerated roll of his shoulders and leaped from Xuanmin’s pouch.

Xuanmin let the evil spirit be, allowing him to tumble toward that stone crack. Right as Xue Xian moved, Xuanmin reached into his pouch to procure a cloth bag, opening it to reveal its contents. Within that cloth bag was a neat row of needles of varying lengths. The longest spanned the distance from wrist to knuckle, while the shortest were around the length of two finger joints.

There was something engraved on the heads of all the needles, but it was difficult to make out with how intricate they were. From his vantage point, Jiang Shining only managed a vague sideways impression and was too polite to lean over for a clearer look.

Xuanmin picked out one of the thicker needles and returned the rest to his pouch.

Meanwhile, Xue Xian was dragging himself toward the stone. Just as he reached the crack and was about to slip inside, a hand descended from above and grabbed him by the head, lifting him back up.

Xue Xian didn’t even need to look. It was obviously Xuanmin’s hand. “Bald donkey, you’ll *pay* for your crimes one day!”

“I eagerly await your punishment,” Xuanmin said blandly.

After that, he put Xue Xian—still in the middle of raging about wasted efforts—back into his pouch before inserting his silver needle into the crack. Holding the other end, he pushed upward, hard.

There was a hollow scraping sound: The frail-looking needle had managed to lift one edge of the slab. Xuanmin braced his fingers beneath the raised edge, then pried the entire slab free.

In that instant, a legion of grieving, mournful wails surged out like a tide.

Xue Xian felt as if a thousand-ton force had slammed into his chest, knocking his senses right out of him. It was fortunate he was made of paper,

or he might have hacked up his lungs from the impact. At the same time, his ears were assaulted by Jiang Shining's undignified scream and Xuanmin's muffled grunt.

By the time he'd regained his awareness, Jiang Shining had been hurled into the wall, reverting to his original form with a puff before fluttering to the floor. There he lay, more dead than usual.

Xuanmin had a hand pressed to his chest, and he coughed several times before collecting himself.

"What was *that*?" Xue Xian asked, exhausted.

It was all he could do to dangle from the pouch's entrance. He could barely raise his head to look at the square opening in the ground. The fresh hole was partially filled with yellow soil, and he could vaguely see an iron chain with a talisman wrapped around its length protruding from that soil. Strangely, the iron chain was rotating on its own.

Frowning, Xuanmin scanned the damp yellow soil before he looked up to search the room.

Xue Xian watched in confusion as Xuanmin stood up and walked to the table. He rummaged until he found a brush, its bristles half gone, then returned to the hole and swept away the soil using the brush.

Xue Xian really had to hand it to Xuanmin. *So fussy,* he silently scoffed. *Will your fingers rot away if they touch some dirt?!*

Once Xuanmin had finished brushing aside the yellow soil, what sat concealed beneath it became visible.

"That's…a millstone?" Xue Xian said, confused.

The round stone block had a hole in the center, a solid base, and a horizontal rod extending from its side—definitely a millstone. However, the stone was unusually small, only about the size of a palm. Its surface was also atypical, being carved with two sets of complex runes. One end of the iron chain was secured to the millstone's base, while the other end was attached to the rod.

Without the yellow soil cushioning it, the chain fell right onto the millstone, making faint scraping sounds as it moved. With each inch it

moved, the horizontal rod rotated slightly, as if an invisible person was ceaselessly pushing the empty millstone day and night.

"Old Lady Liu?" Xue Xian called without thinking.

"Hahhh…" That weary sigh echoed once more.

Xue Xian felt a chill run down his spine. Of course, paper couldn't get cold, and he *wasn't* scared, but the thought that a person could trap their own mother underground just to guarantee themselves a prosperous future filled him with disgust. Some people were remarkably grotesque in their wickedness. Raising a millstone would be better than raising a son like that!

Xuanmin reached in and removed that millstone, no larger than his palm, from the hole. Placing it on the ground, he peeled off the yellow talisman wrapped around the iron chain, then lit a tendril of flame, burning it to ashes.

As the yellow talisman was swallowed, Xue Xian, who was hanging at the pouch's entrance, sensed a faint droning vibration. It felt like someone was striking a hammer against his bones, the force neither hard nor soft but distinctly unpleasant.

This millstone had been sealed underground for at least three years, absorbing great quantities of resentful energy from its surroundings. With the talisman gone, the bitter energy bound to it was dissipating. An adverse reaction to the sensation was normal. But if he—a limp paper doll at a distance—felt this much discomfort, the man burning the talisman must have been suffering even more.

Xue Xian turned to glance at Xuanmin, only to find him completely unaffected. His expression was cold, as if he were doing a different task entirely. Xue Xian had a sudden sense that Xuanmin was unlike any monks he'd seen before, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly how.

Perhaps…he was just *extra* infuriating!

While Xue Xian was thinking his ridiculous thoughts, Xuanmin finished burning the talisman. As the last of its ashes fluttered to the ground, the iron chain fastened to the millstone snapped with a crack and clattered to the floor.

The faint shadow leaning against the millstone slowly came into focus. At first, it resembled a withered branch curled upon the ground. But before Xue Xian and Xuanmin's eyes, it swelled, morphing into a hunched old woman.

The old woman's hair was sparse and white, tied into a limp bun at the back of her head. Her face was etched with deep creases, and her eyes were clouded, as if perpetually brimming with old tears. Her appearance bore a faint resemblance to that of Old Lady Liu, yet this version, now a true ghost, seemed even more frail than the cane-using apparition within the array. It looked as if she might shut her eyes and collapse at any moment. Without her cane, her crooked body seemed even more deformed; her left side was much more shrunken than her right. She could barely stand upright and had to support herself against the millstone's rod.

"How horrific," Xue Xian muttered. As a creature born from nature, he'd grown up without parents and thus had little understanding of familial bonds. However, after being thrust into human society for these last six months, he'd managed to glean some superficial insights.

Scribe Liu had opened Xue Xian's eyes to a new low. To do something so monstrous… How much did he hate his own mother?

Xuanmin glanced down at him, and his gaze left Xue Xian a little perturbed. He defiantly raised his chin and glared back, but it was lacking in strength. He rolled his eyes. A moment later, he came up with a great idea: *To! The! Head!*

He'd always acted on impulse, so he wasted no time hauling himself up Xuanmin's robe using his arms. As he'd done this before, his movements were much nimbler this time. In a flash, he reached the front of Xuanmin's robe. As he extended his arms to heave himself further up, a scream came from the doorway.

"Ahhhh! Don't touch me! Help! *Help!*"

The voice was shrill, desperate, deafening, and most of all, unpleasant—as if its owner had seen a ghost. In Xue Xian's surprise, his hands wavered and he lost his grip. He fell from Xuanmin's chest and fluttered down to land, gracelessly, right on his face.

Humiliated, Xue Xian refused to make eye contact with anyone after his fall. His limbs were stiff as he lay there unmoving, as if he'd perished upon touching the floor.

Xuanmin ignored the unending screams outside and crouched down to look at the paper figure sprawled on the ground and playing dead.

"Not getting up?" he asked indifferently.

Xue Xian played dead even harder.

Xuanmin tapped on the back of his paper head with a finger. "Time to burn you, then." Without further comment, he lit a fire starter.

The tiny flame licked close to the paper, and Xue Xian could feel the heat baking his body.

"Where did your Buddhist compassion go?" Xue Xian cried. "Did you feed it to the dogs?!"

At this, Xuanmin stayed his hand, as if he'd recollected something. His expression flickered for a moment, then he shook his head and put out the fire starter.

Picking Xue Xian up by one of his paper feet, Xuanmin asked in a low voice, "Still want to climb?"

Xue Xian covered his face with both hands while being dangled upside down, even more humiliated. Still, he couldn't resist retorting, "I'll climb your *dad*!"

As Xuanmin tucked Xue Xian back into the bag without further comment, lumbering footsteps rushed toward the inner chamber.

Uncovering his eyes, Xue Xian saw Liu Chong staring blankly at them. He had just escaped the array and seemed to have been through quite an ordeal. His blue robe was torn in several places, with stuffing protruding from the holes, and his expression was anguished as he turned to say something to Xuanmin.

However, before Liu Chong could speak, his gaze fixed on the old lady holding onto the millstone, and he froze.

“Grand…Grandma?” he called to her hesitantly. Perhaps the apparition in the array had attacked him, for he shrank back, too afraid to step forward.

Old Lady Liu raised her lifeless eyes to look at Liu Chong. As soon as she saw him, tears sprang to her eyes and streamed down her face. With a pained sigh, still supporting herself against the millstone, she gestured to Liu Chong.

“Chong-er, what happened to your clothes?”

The moment he heard her tone, all the suffering Liu Chong had endured within the array was wiped from his mind. He rushed forward with watering eyes and fell to his knees, trying to grasp Old Lady Liu’s hand. “Grandma, why did you shrink? Wh-why can’t I touch you?”

The millstone had drained the old woman for far too long. Now, she stood barely half the height of the average elder, her form hunched and frail. She said none of this to Liu Chong, though; instead, she pursed her lips and smiled.

“Grandma’s old. People shrink when we’re old. It’s fine if you can’t touch me.”

“G-Grandma, why haven’t you come to see me? I folded so many ingots. Didn’t you say that if I folded them and wrote a name on them, everyone would come to take them? But I-I fold and burn them every day, and no one ever comes to see me. Why haven’t you come even once? I want to hear you talk, I want to talk to you, but I never see you. I’ve… I’ve already forgotten what I wanted to say…”

Liu Chong’s mind was still that of a child. Upon seeing the grandmother he’d missed so dearly, he gasped out the rest of his words, then started to cry. He lacked the restraint of an adult man, so he sobbed like a waterfall, as if his tears could empty out all the words he’d stored up for three years and forgotten.

“Grandma was listening. Even if Chong-er doesn’t tell me, your grandma already knows.” Old Lady Liu wiped her tears. “I’m always watching you, day and night…”

While grandmother and grandson wept, the man outside burst into the house like a madman. “Help! Help! Don’t touch me—stay away!”

The newcomer’s hair was disheveled and his clothes were ragged. He must have taken his fair share of tumbles, because his body was covered in mud and his appearance was wretched.

“Wait, isn’t that Scribe Liu?” Xue Xian said after studying him.

From the looks of it, Liu Chong had been quite lucky. The array must have terrified Scribe Liu beyond imagination, given how he’d recklessly charged inside the house despite his intense reluctance to enter it earlier.

Xuanmin frowned at Scribe Liu’s mud-covered clothes and stepped aside. Scribe Liu was still rushing forward; with no one to catch him, he crashed directly into Liu Chong and fell to the ground on his behind.

With that, he found himself face-to-face with Old Lady Liu. Scribe Liu was instantly petrified: His body stiffened and his eyes went wide. In his terror, he even forgot to breathe.

A man who'd committed too much evil would eventually find himself unable to face his own mother. His miserable appearance contrasted starkly and ironically with that of the weeping Liu Chong.

Old Lady Liu wiped at her tears before looking at Scribe Liu. Her sobs gradually subsided, though her eyes remained like hazy pools. Juxtaposed with her calm expression, they somehow appeared to shine with an even deeper sorrow.

"Why are you trembling?" Old Lady Liu asked, her voice tinged with fathomless grief. "Are you afraid that your own mother has come to take your life?"

Scribe Liu shook his head. His face was ashen, his lips trembling as he stammered, "I-I just…"

He could barely complete his sentence before he choked on his words, unable to continue. He lowered his head and took a couple of deep, gasping breaths, then sank to his knees. Bowing low, he knocked his head against the floor in front of his mother.

"Your son foolishly believed that sorcerer's nonsense and committed a grave sin in his confusion. Your son was unfilial!"

After saying this, he burst into tears. His forehead, bloodied from hitting the ground, remained pressed there. He didn't manage another coherent word.

"You're only saying this *now*?" Xue Xian stared at Scribe Liu's curled-up form, utterly repulsed.

As Xue Xian had always been straightforward, what he couldn't stand the most were people who dodged responsibility with excuses. To be unfilial was to be unfilial. To be selfish and cruel was to be selfish and cruel. Now, this man was trying to push all the blame onto a sorcerer. Unbelievably shameless.

Only your parents would buy this kind of nonsensical garbage, Xue Xian thought.

Old Lady Liu said nothing, but she continued to stare at Scribe Liu. No one would be happy to see the son they raised reduced to such a state.

She paused for a long time before sighing.

"A single hand cannot clap on its own," she said at last. If he hadn't had the desire, no number of alluring words from the sorcerer would have swayed him into action.

Upon hearing this, Scribe Liu stiffened mid-kneel. He cautiously raised his head to look at Old Lady Liu, hoping to glean some hints from her eyes, and found no trace of a vengeful spirit there.

Old Lady Liu sighed again and waved him over. "Come here."

She had always been slow to anger. Her tone stayed gentle, but it carried a hint of resignation. There was no animosity within that resignation.

Upon hearing her words, Scribe Liu hesitated for a moment but then shuffled closer to Old Lady Liu. His eyes held a glimmer of hope—after all, if she truly had turned into a vengeful spirit, she wouldn't use such a tone. There might still be room to turn things around.

"Look at your mother," she said softly.

"I really haven't seen you properly in a long time, Mom," Scribe Liu added, offered an inch and taking a mile.

Old Lady Liu looked back at him, then slapped him hard across the face.

No one had expected her to do this so suddenly. For a moment, they were all stunned.

Scribe Liu clutched at his face, more shocked than anyone else. "Mom, you—" He could barely find the words.

"Ah, I want to hit him too," Xue Xian sighed.

Scribe Liu was too dismayed to hear Xue Xian's mumbling. He held his face for a long time before returning to his senses. "I-I had no choice. I really didn't. I hired the sorcerer for *you*."

He hooked onto that idea, seeming to find a way to spin the explanation. "That's right, I hired that sorcerer for you from the start! Your health was getting worse and worse, and you were always hunched over to

one side… The quacks from the Jiang family told me it was the result of multiple illnesses piling up, making things difficult to cure. That's why I decided to find a sorcerer. Mom, you might not understand, but the northeast house you lived in was a prime location. That sorcerer told me that when laid out properly, it could bring even the dead back to life. I wanted you to get better quickly. But…haaah…"

"Doesn't the northeast house belong to your second son, Liu Jin?" asked Xue Xian, puzzled.

"H-huh?! Jin-er moved in later!" Scribe Liu rushed to say halfway through his sigh.

After a very long silence, Old Lady Liu spoke. "I know." She looked at her son, her gaze nostalgic. "Not only did you put me in a wonderful house, but you visited every day, asking after me and serving me tea and water. Even when I was bedridden and paralyzed in the end, you still came to sit by my bed whenever you had the time. Your mother remembers everything."

Some people were just contradictory. You couldn't call Scribe Liu unfilial, because he *had* fulfilled his filial duties, but you also couldn't call him filial when a few words from a sorcerer had convinced him to trap his mother's spirit beneath the compound. Clearly, he was the type to squeeze every last drop from whatever he could.

"But…" Old Lady Liu continued, "it was after you trapped me here that I realized how you got me that wonderful house. You bought it using my Chong-er's life. That slap I gave you was for Chong-er!"

After saying this, Old Lady Liu abruptly raised her hand again.

Slap!

She landed a second strike on the other side of Scribe Liu's face. "And this one is for the Jiang family clinic! The medicine I took during my last few days, you switched it out, didn't you? Hazy as my mind was, I could tell it'd changed. You are my child. I knew what you were thinking…"

She shook her head and sighed. “You saw that your mother wasn’t improving and decided there wasn’t any point playing the filial son for someone who was mostly gone. It’s exhausting work with no reward. With your reputation as a good son established, all it took was a few words from that sorcerer, and you chose to send your mother on her way ahead of schedule. Am I right?”

Scribe Liu kneeled there, completely speechless.

“What’s done is done, but you shouldn’t have laid the blame on the Jiang family. I couldn’t open my eyes or speak by then, but I could still overhear what the maids were talking about. You wronged the Jiang family, smearing them as quacks who killed their patients. Have you no shame?”

Old Lady Liu closed her eyes. This form of hers, released from entrapment, couldn’t hold out much longer. Within a few brief moments, her body began to fade and her features turned indistinct.

“I am your birth mother. Chong-er is your son. The debt owed between family members is different from what’s owed to outsiders. For three years, your mother pushed the millstone for you. With this, I’ve repaid my debt for your care. Chong-er has lived here for so long that he’s repaid the twenty years you spent raising him. Now, you must repay the debt you owe the Jiang family as well.”

“Mom—Mom, what do you mean by that?” Scribe Liu raised his head, his expression both panicked and befuddled.

“A debt owed is a debt owed. It cannot be erased and must always be repaid.” Old Lady Liu took a long look at him, then turned to Xuanmin. “Master, is it time for me to go?” She’d probably taken Xuanmin for one of those monks who performed last rites, helping spirits cross over.

Xuanmin looked down at her and pointed to the millstone.

Old Lady Liu didn’t wait for him to explain. She nodded, as if understanding what he meant. Then, she turned to look at Liu Chong. The sobbing fool had raised his head. He hadn’t quite understood her words earlier, but now he could sense her impending departure.

“Grandma… Are you tired?” he asked.

“Yes, Grandma is very tired,” said Old Lady Liu gently. “She needs to sleep for a while.”

“If I burn ingots, can I see you?”

“Grandma can hear everything you say. You may not be able to see her, but she will…always be watching you.”

With that, Old Lady Liu turned around and entered the millstone. Xuanmin reached down to pick it up, then picked up Jiang Shining, who’d reverted to his paper doll form and was lying on the ground. Turning without a word, he walked outside.

“Master! Master! My face!” Scribe Liu was frozen for a while, then stumbled out after him, shaking as he touched his own face. “Why is it swollen?!”

Xuanmin glanced sideways at him. Scribe Liu’s cheeks had ballooned, and two palm marks were printed clearly upon them, crimson as blood. Some of his skin had sloughed off, causing the web of veins underneath to protrude angrily—a terrifying sight.

“Vengeful spirits can’t touch the living,” said Xuanmin.

In the blink of an eye, Scribe Liu’s face had become so swollen that he could barely speak. “Th-then, why…?”

“But a vengeful spirit harboring grievances has a single chance to seek justice,” continued Xuanmin. “They can leave a mark on the wrongdoer.”

Scribe Liu’s face was filled with fear. “What comes after the mark? Will she return to take my life?”

“She didn’t leave that mark for herself,” Xuanmin said coldly. “She left it for your son Liu Chong and for the Jiang family. Both of them have suffered greatly because of you.”

Her punishment was simply giving him a taste of his own medicine.

“Ah, don’t leave! Help me! Please help me, Great Master!” Scribe Liu fell to his knees with a plop and shuffled forward to clutch the hem of Xuanmin’s robe.

From his perch at the pouch's entrance, Xue Xian suddenly spoke. "Hey, Liu, you bastard. I have a question! Did you travel to Huameng, Guangdong this summer?"

In a panic, Scribe Liu thought Xuanmin had asked the question. He shook his head hard. "No, no. I've never been that far." After answering, he shivered and continued to plead, "Help me, help me…"

"That's impossible," Xue Xian said coldly.

"It's the truth! I swear it! How could I dare lie to you?" Scribe Liu was on the verge of smashing his head to the ground in a bow. He really didn't look like he was lying.

But how could that be? If he hadn't gone to Huameng, why was he carrying Xue Xian's mark of blood? Xue Xian stared at the bloodstain that Xuanmin had pointed out earlier, both irritated and confused. "If you tell even a single lie—"

"I dare not, I dare not… Ah, wait!" Desperate for help, Scribe Liu was the picture of eagerness, as if he longed to split his skull open and show them the insides. "That's right! I do know someone from Huameng in Guangdong. A fisherman! I don't have much connection to him, but he sold me what looked like a marble made of gold—"

"A marble?! What did it look like?" Xue Xian interjected, recalling the droning sound he'd heard before falling into the array. He couldn't stop himself from asking, "Where is the marble now?"

Scribe Liu shrank away and stammered, "I-it's…"

"Why are you mumbling?! Speak up!" Getting a half-hearted answer at a moment like this made Xue Xian want to toss Scribe Liu into the South Sea.

"The sorcerer said the marble had a great amount of spiritual energy, so he melted it into the millstone." Scribe Liu's head had practically shrunk into his collar.

Xue Xian fell silent, but inside he was bursting with fury. *You… You refined my dragon body to make your millstone? You motherfucker, why didn't you stuff yourself inside?!*

So great was Xue Xian's rage that he passed out on the spot.

Seeing that he'd gone limp, Xuanmin made to leave again.

"No, you can't go! Don't leave, help me, help me…" Scribe Liu clutched at Xuanmin's robe in a death grip.

Xuanmin looked down at Scribe Liu for a few moments before stooping down. In a low voice, he muttered a few words in a language Scribe Liu didn't understand. They seemed like part of a sutra. Next, the monk struck Scribe Liu's forehead with the back of his hand.

Scribe Liu felt the vibrations ringing through his skull, as if a thousand bells were pealing there. "Y-you removed the mark?" he murmured, sounding pleased.

"It's only insurance. The debt must be repaid."

At these words, Scribe Liu froze. Xuanmin wrenched his robe free of Scribe Liu's hands, stood, and turned to leave.

Returning to his senses, Scribe Liu crawled after Xuanmin, crying, "Buddhists must be merciful and compassionate…"

"This humble monk cultivates no compassion."

Xuanmin didn't look back as he strode away.

Chapter 8:
Medical Bell

AS XUE XIAN DRIFTED within his rage-induced stupor, he seemed to hear an odd ringing sound coming from inside Xuanmin's body that came from both near and far. It reverberated through Xue Xian, rendering it impossible to breathe.

He stayed unconscious for a very long time. By the time he woke and peeked out through the pouch's opening once more, they were no longer inside the Liu residence.

Looking around, Xue Xian saw what appeared to be a bedroom. The bed was neatly made, the lamps were bright, and the faint aroma of moringa leaves wafted around the room, along with the faint, almost imperceptible smell of medicine. Xuanmin was standing in front of an ornate round wooden table. Jiang Shining, that nuisance of a paper doll, was standing on top of it, while next to him was the empty millstone from the Liu residence, a thin cloth bag, a copper basin filled with fresh water, and a pale green porcelain tea set with a name carved into the side: *Guiyun Hall*.

When Xue Xian saw that, it became obvious that they were inside an inn, occupying one of the luxury suites. Guiyun Hall's name meant *returning to the clouds*. In the months he'd spent mingling with humans, Xue Xian had seen Zhuangyuan House, which was named after the highest rank achievable on the imperial exam, where scholars loved to stay. He'd also seen Guangyuan House, which evoked vast, fertile headwaters and was a favorite of merchants. He'd seen other common names, like Yuelai—*joy comes*—and Fushun—*fortune follows*—all of them auspicious names. By contrast, a name like Guiyun made it sound like the inn was blessing its residents with a swift journey to the heavens.

Only those who've had their brains pecked out would stay here, Xue Xian thought. Clearly, Xuanmin was one of those. A chicken had probably cleaned out his entire skull.

Xuanmin meticulously washed his hands within the copper basin. Watching this, Xue Xian had to admit that Xuanmin possessed a lovely set of fingers, slender and fair, and the bones of his knuckles were linear when he extended them. He seemed completely unaware of the concept of hurrying; he did everything at a steady, methodical pace. Even the act of washing his hands contained a stolid solemnity, as if he were reciting a sutra.

"Have to say, the way you wash your hands, you look like you're performing a funeral service."

Xuanmin locked eyes with Xue Xian. "It's exactly that."

"For who?"

"Lady Xu."

"Lady Xu?"

A melancholic sigh came from the millstone. "Thank you very much, Master."

Who else could it be other than Old Lady Liu? Xue Xian stared up at Xuanmin, expressionless. "I… Hmm, how long was I asleep? Enough for you to learn that old lady's maiden name, I see."

He'd almost said, "How long was I out cold?" but the memory of passing out in rage was not a glorious one. For the sake of his dragon's pride, he reworded the story.

Shaking water drops from his hands, Xuanmin meticulously dried them with a white towel. "You passed out for ten hours. It's night now."

Why haven't you been tossed in a moat yet? Do you have to rub salt in everyone's wounds? You're a coffin lid that'd pinch whoever tries to close you, Xue Xian thought with fury. He snapped his mouth shut, unwilling to talk to Xuanmin anymore. He didn't know how to make small talk at all!

Xuanmin paid no heed to Xue Xian. Instead, he put down the towel and unwrapped his cloth bag, taking out a small stack of yellow papers and a brush.

Beside the copper basin was a small dish of ink, freshly ground. Xuanmin spread a sheet of yellow paper, dipped the brush into the ink, and wrote a few characters:

Lady Xu from the Liu Clan

The Twenty-Third of the Seventh Month, Year of Bingyin

Next, Xuanmin retrieved a stick of incense from a cloth bundle before folding the yellow paper bearing Old Lady Liu's maiden name thrice. He dipped it into the candle flame, then placed it on the millstone. The thin yellow paper was surprisingly slow to burn, but the millstone's surface darkened and became coated in a layer of paper ash.

With one end touched to the smoldering paper, Xuanmin slowly rotated the incense stick, letting it burn through.

Xue Xian couldn't hold back any longer. "Rites for the deceased?" he asked.

He'd only seen the usual rites, often called "Buddha's Healing Seven." It consisted of a bunch of bald donkeys just like Xuanmin sitting in a circle, their heads shiny enough to light up the entire hall. They would alternate between two shifts, day and night, ceaselessly chanting sutras for the deceased for a full seven days and nights. Once, Xue Xian had pursued the wrong person and ended up in a house in the middle of a funeral. Surrounded by grieving relatives, he'd helplessly sat there for seven long days, the monks' incessant murmurs buzzing in his ears, leaving him with a migraine so severe he wished he could hang himself on the coffin.

Since then, he'd come down with a headache whenever he saw a monk. He was terrified that Xuanmin might also chant for seven days and nights. If that happened, he might as well jump off a building right now and put an end to it all.

As Xuanmin rotated the incense stick, a thin wisp of blue smoke coiled around the millstone, releasing a subtle sandalwood fragrance. "The hands are washed, the words inscribed. With incense burning, the sutras intoned—all to ferry the soul to the afterlife."

He was really going to chant sutras. Xue Xian immediately dove out of the pouch.

"What are you doing?" Xuanmin asked.

"I don't want to live anymore," Xue Xian whined. "Going to jump."

Xuanmin could say nothing to that.

Of course, Xue Xian couldn't actually jump off a building; the most he could do was tumble from Xuanmin's waist to land on the ornate round table. When Xue Xian was halfway to rolling off the edge, Xuanmin grabbed the paper doll and put him back on the table.

Xuanmin was very fussy—not at all like a proper monk. This could be seen from both his behavior and the well-furnished guest room he was staying in. At this moment, his fastidiousness was flaring again, for he seemed displeased with how crumpled Xue Xian's body was. He unceremoniously smoothed out the creases with a finger, then picked up a hefty stone paperweight and pressed it on top of Xue Xian.

The paperweight was a narrow rectangular block roughly half the size of a palm. It left Xue Xian's head and two thin legs exposed, while his hands barely peeked out from either side. Xue Xian thrashed a couple of times but was only able to lift his hands a little. The rest of him remained immobile.

You bastard! Xue Xian howled in his head.

Xuanmin ignored him and focused on the incense. As it dwindled to its end, he quietly recited a single line from his sutras before falling silent. It seemed this was what he'd meant by "intoning." It differed greatly from Xue Xian's expectations.

At last, the paper and incense burned out as one. Just as the last ember flickered and died, Xuanmin tapped the millstone that had bound Old Lady Liu for over three years.

A series of cracking sounds echoed through the air. The millstone, which had looked so solid and unbreakable before, suddenly shattered into several pieces.

At the same time, the faint voice of Old Lady Liu echoed again. “I feel as if a great burden has been lifted. I will take my leave now. Thank you.”

With her words, Xue Xian saw a shadow flicker across the millstone. Then it vanished, together with the ashes from the incense and the paper.

However, at the moment the millstone cracked and Old Lady Liu disappeared, two other faint sounds echoed within the room. Like the soft jingling of bells attached to a carriage, it reverberated down the street, drifting over from afar.

Then, something rolled out from the center of the cracked millstone and landed on the table. Two sounds in succession: *Clink! Clang!*

Xue Xian felt something rolling toward him across the table. Before he could lift his head, some round thing had rolled right over the back of it. “What blind piece of garbage was that?! I’ll break it!”

Xuanmin reached out, and the round object rolled right off the edge of the table and into his palm. He held it between his fingers, examining it. “A golden marble the size of a sheep’s eye.”

Xue Xian froze. “Sheep’s eye? Golden marble!” So it really was—!

Of course. A dragon’s body, compressed into a golden marble… Like a random sorcerer would be capable of refining that! All that sorcerer had done was shove it crudely inside the millstone.

Right as Xue Xian was celebrating, Xuanmin said, “Mm. Since it’s a blind piece of garbage, let’s break it.”

“No, wait! Don’t you dare! I’ll break *you*!”

“Why, is it no longer garbage?” asked Xuanmin blandly.

“It’s no longer garbage,” Xue Xian grumbled.

“Don’t want to break it anymore?”

“No breaking! It’s *mine*! Who dares to break it?”

“Yours? Where’s your proof?”

Xue Xian tried switching to charm. “Very well. Move the paperweight aside and I’ll show you.”

Xuanmin glanced at him. “A description will suffice.”

Xue Xian would rather vomit his guts onto this bald donkey’s face than tell him a thing. However, the golden marble was truly important. While it was in Xuanmin’s hands, Xue Xian dared not take rash action and was therefore forced to comply a little.

“Hold the marble to the candle flame. You’ll see,” Xue Xian said in his best monotone. He would see the vague shape of a dragon coiled within. Although it would be hard to tell since its head and claws were curled against its body.

Instead of explaining that, Xue Xian gritted his teeth and said, “You’ll see some curved patterns inside. Have you ever seen any other translucent golden marbles?”

Xuanmin brought the golden marble closer to the candle flame. Sure enough, though initially indistinguishable from ordinary gold, the marble became slightly translucent, revealing a coiled shape within.

“A snake,” said Xuanmin.

Xue Xian bit his tongue, but his expression was livid. *Your mother’s a snake!*

“Don’t you believe me now? Move your stupid paperweight away, okay? Give me back my marble!”

Xuanmin wasn’t an unreasonable person. Having heard Xue Xian’s proof and rationale, he reached over and removed the paperweight.

Xue Xian propped himself up, gripping the table to shake off the vertigo from being crushed under what amounted to a mountain of stone for him. He stretched his paper arms toward Xuanmin, his tone impatient. “Where’s my marble? Give it to me, quick!”

Xuanmin pointed at the center of the table. “First, go—”

“Enough with the bullshit. Just give it to me!” Xue Xian interrupted, irritated.

Xuanmin stared at him for a moment before placing the marble between Xue Xian’s paper paws.

Thump!

The golden marble wasn’t light. Paper had no way of supporting its weight. Xue Xian felt his hands slam downward. His vision went dark, and the accursed marble dragged him right off the table, sending him crashing to the floor.

He didn’t want to live anymore.

When Xuanmin plucked Xue Xian from the ground, his tiny hands were still tightly clutching at the golden marble, like a feeble miser guarding his treasure to the end.

“I was only asking you to move closer to the center of the table.” Xuanmin placed the paper doll in that spot and gazed down at him. “Still going to interrupt me next time?”

Mind your own business! Xue Xian hissed mentally.

However, he was reeling from the nasty fall and afraid that upsetting Xuanmin might lead to his precious marble being confiscated. “Fine,” Xue Xian said with a reluctant snort. “I’ll suffer the injustice of letting you finish speaking next time.”

Clutching the marble, he rolled around on the table until he bumped into something with a clang. Only then did he remember that two objects had fallen out of the millstone, not one.

Sprawled over the top of the golden marble, Xue Xian glanced at the obstacle and realized he’d collided with a silver disk the size of an apricot. There was a thin seam around its edge. When touched, it made a tinny noise.

“What’s this?” Xue Xian asked as he rolled a distance away to get a different view of it. But even from there, it wasn’t something he recognized.

Jiang Shining’s voice broke in. “It’s a medical bell.”

With his body plastered seamlessly to the golden marble, Xue Xian rolled right into the stone paperweight, where he finally came to a stop. “You’re awake?”

“I was awake the entire time, just unable to speak,” said Jiang Shining. “My ability to talk just returned, probably because it’s nighttime.”

His once dull voice was gentle, infused with an ineffable vitality that hadn’t been there before. It was as if some invisible burden had been lifted from him, leaving him much more relaxed. Right after speaking, he slipped from the table to the chair, then from the chair to the floor, where he reverted to his scholar’s appearance.

Picking up the medical bell, he rubbed it with his fingers. “It belongs to my family.”

Xue Xian was taken back. “Your family?”

“Mm.” Jiang Shining nodded. He showed Xue Xian one side of the bell, where a name was carved: *Jiang Yong.*

“That’s my great-grandfather’s name,” he explained. “He used to be a traveling doctor. He’d walk the streets every day, making calls to his patients. In those days, all traveling doctors would hang a silver medical bell on their medicine chests to notify their patients of their arrival as they walked around. When the sick heard it, they would come out to receive treatment. This was his bell. These days, traveling doctors are rare. Most of them are based in physical clinics and pharmacies. The Jiang family practiced medicine for generations, and this bell was passed down from my great-grandfather to my parents to keep our roots in mind.”

“Your parents?” Xuanmin frowned. He reached for the bell to examine it. After a moment, he asked, “Have you any blood relatives left?”

“I do,” said Jiang Shining. “My older sister was married off to Anqing, so she escaped the fire.”

“Your parents’ souls are trapped inside this bell. It’s different from Lady Xu’s situation with the millstone. I can’t free them for now. You’ll need three drops of laogong blood from one of your living relatives.”

“Laogong blood?” Having been born into a medical family, Jiang Shining knew exactly what he was talking about. “You mean fresh blood from the acupoint in the center of the palm?”

Xuanmin nodded. After returning the medical bell to Jiang Shining, Xuanmin glanced at the cloth bag nearby. Xue Xian followed his gaze and noticed there was another incense stick in the cloth bag.

“Hey, you used one incense stick to send off Lady Xu,” Xue Xian said, carelessly pointing at it, “so what’s the other one for?”

“To send off this scholar.” Xuanmin was blunt.

Before Jiang Shining could react, Xue Xian had already raised his head. “What?! You—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Xuanmin braced himself against the table, his brows firmly creased and eyes slightly closed, as if he was unwell.

Xue Xian stopped talking to study Xuanmin. “Bald donkey?”

He tentatively called out to him twice, but Xuanmin didn’t respond. Instead, he remained seated with his eyes closed, as though he were meditating. Fine red lines reminiscent of the legs of a spider suddenly crept from the small mole on his neck.

However, Xue Xian didn’t notice this detail, even as he stared at Xuanmin for a while. Once Xue Xian was sure Xuanmin wasn’t dying *or* regaining consciousness, he waved at Jiang Shining.

Around ten minutes later, a frail-looking scholar could be seen hurrying down the road on the outskirts of Ningyang County, away from Guiyun Hall. On his shoulder sat a paper doll, greedily clutching a golden marble in its arms.

Jiang Shining and Xue Xian.

As Xue Xian urged him to walk faster, Jiang Shining hesitantly said, “I-I still feel like this is wrong.”

“*What’s* wrong?” Xue Xian asked, stroking his golden marble.

“Rushing off and leaving the Master behind like that.”

Xue Xian glared at him. “Are you sleep talking, you damn bookworm? He’s a ghost catcher, and we’re the ones who got caught! Have you ever seen escaped criminals bringing the warden along for a prison break?”

“No,” Jiang Shining admitted. He understood what Xue Xian was saying, but after thinking a while longer, he continued, “Still—”

“Don’t say still.”

“But—”

“No buts, either!”

Jiang Shining looked at him, defeated.

Xue Xian sprawled over the golden marble as he drawled, “I know, I know. I’m always right.”

What could Jiang Shining say to that?

Ningyang County observed a nightly curfew. Barriers and guardhouses had been set up at the larger crossroads, while the watchmen stood by with bags of wine to keep themselves warm. All four of the city gates were now tightly shut. Normal townsfolk who wished to leave the city at this time would have to sprout wings.

However, the curfew wasn't an issue for the two in this situation. The advantages of Jiang Shining's paper figure became invaluable now. When necessary, he could compress himself into a thin sheet and slip through doors and gaps.

Xue Xian's eyes were keener than a dog's. Each time he spotted the watchmen's shadowy forms in the distance and barked his orders to Jiang Shining, he was confident and decisive.

"Turn east."

"At the next corner, hug the wall and head into the alley."

"Continue straight, then turn west."

Jiang Shining had a mild personality and was accustomed to obeying Xue Xian's orders, so he complied without question for a while. But after putting his faith in Xue Xian and walking for a long time, Jiang Shining finally couldn't take it anymore and stopped.

"Wise One, please shut up," he said, distressed.

"What's wrong? We were doing just fine. The watchmen haven't noticed us."

"I know!" snapped Jiang Shining. "They haven't noticed us, but I've noticed this *fabric shop* three times over. If I keep following your instructions, we won't be leaving the city until next year."

Xue Xian hugged his golden marble. "Hmph… It's getting dark. We should find a place to rest soon."

This hoodlum and his fragile ego! Jiang Shining thought.

Without Xue Xian's useless directions, Jiang Shining made quite a bit more progress. Soon, they'd left the place they'd circled thrice and were traveling the main road.

"This building looks familiar." Xue Xian glanced around, sure that he'd seen this street before.

Jiang Shining grunted. "You really have no sense of direction. We passed through this area this morning. How could you forget so quickly?"

His reminder jogged Xue Xian's memory: If they continued forward and headed east at the next corner, they'd see Scribe Liu's residence.

In the stillness of the night, even the faintest of sounds were magnified, becoming many times clearer than the same during the day. As they rounded the street corner, they caught a glimpse of the familiar courtyard gates, and a faint smattering of voices drifted over to them. It sounded like an argument, or something similar. Nothing peaceful, at any rate.

Jiang Shining halted for a second.

Xue Xian turned to the Liu family's compound. "What is it? You want to see him get his just deserts?"

Jiang Shining shook his head. "That's Scribe Liu's own business. It has nothing to do with me."

He lingered no longer and headed toward the city gate. Perhaps it was a doctor's nature, but he couldn't stand to watch others suffer. This might have been the biggest difference between him and people like Scribe Liu.

Chapter 9:
The Old Clinic

MOUNTAINS AND FORESTS stood thick around the capital of Ningyang County, though most of them were gentle and picturesque. Steep, treacherous areas were rare.

The current state preceptor was a monk, which had led to the emergence of mountain temples in various provinces some years ago, and they'd flourished for a time. Recently, winter had been arriving earlier and earlier for some reason—even the south saw endless heavy snowfall. It was often said that a snowy year signaled a bountiful harvest; however, recent years had also been plagued by poor rainfall, resulting in low yields and forcing the commonfolk to adopt more frugal lifestyles. When even making ends meet was difficult, no one spared money for temples. As a result, the number of abandoned temples in the mountains increased, and they were transformed into temporary shelters for travelers instead.

By the time Jiang Shining and Xue Xian stopped to rest in a run-down temple on Mount Jiguan, snow had begun to drift down outside. As soon as they stepped inside, Xue Xian snagged the best spot for himself. He grabbed some dry straw from the ground, spread it out beneath the statue of Buddha, and settled in without a moment's hesitation.

Now that they weren't traveling, he didn't have to maintain his paper-doll form and reverted back to his human appearance. He sat back languidly, clad in his black robes as he propped his elbows on the statue's platform. One hand supported his chin while the other continued to fiddle with his golden marble.

Jiang Shining rubbed his forehead. Just looking at Xue Xian made his head throb. "Even if it's an abandoned temple, you ought to show some decorum. You can't just sit on a Buddha statue like that!"

Xue Xian casually patted the statue's leg. "Hey you, lend me this space. Tell me if you object." He solemnly pretended to wait, then jerked his chin at Jiang Shining. "See? Nothing."

“You know what? Do whatever you want. I don’t care.”

Jiang Shining blew the dust from the candle in front of the Buddha, then asked Xue Xian for a fire starter. The wick was damp and a struggle to light—*and* he had to worry about accidentally setting himself on fire!

Xue Xian handed one over. When Jiang Shining was done with the candle, he extinguished the fire starter’s flame. “Where did you get that?”

“Swiped it from the bald donkey’s bag before we left,” Xue Xian said without batting an eye.

“This is the first time I’ve encountered someone bold enough to steal from the warden during a prison break,” Jiang Shining said, just about at the end of his rope.

“He won’t miss it.”

Whenever the topic of Xuanmin came up, Jiang Shining felt a twinge of guilt. “Do you dislike him that much? Just because he captured us?”

Xue Xian shook his head.

“Then, why were you so desperate to escape him?” Jiang Shining pointed to himself and to Xue Xian. “To be honest, neither of us can do much. If we run into trouble along the way, things could get rough. I only have a medical bell on me, which isn’t worth stealing, but your golden marble is a different story. If someone sets their sights on it…”

Xue Xian held the golden marble in front of the firelight, rolling it between his fingers. His reason for fleeing in the middle of the night lay in this golden marble, which also contained his dragon body. At present, his body had not fully recovered, and his connection to the golden marble was quite tenuous. Although it rested in his hand, he felt little to no sensation from it, as if he were merely holding an ordinary marble.

But that wasn’t the case with Xuanmin. Xue Xian had a sense of something beneath the skin at Xuanmin’s hip—something deeply strange. If he had detected it only once, Xue Xian might have dismissed it, but after a second time, it was impossible to ignore. Xue Xian had yet to see Xuanmin do anything remarkable, but he was still certain that the monk was hiding a secret.

He couldn't feel anything from the marble, but perhaps Xuanmin could. The longer he and the golden marble stayed with Xuanmin, the more susceptible the marble became to the monk's influence. If anything went wrong with the marble, Xue Xian could forget about restoring his dragon form.

"Besides, we have no idea where he's from or what his motives are," he said to Jiang Shining. "He doesn't seem like a rogue sorcerer scraping by for a living, nor does he act like those real monks who go around helping others out of compassion. During a couple of very brief moments, I could even sense a chilling ferociousness from him."

Confused, Jiang Shining said, "What do you mean, 'chilling ferociousness'? Can't you explain it in a way that makes sense?"

Xue Xian clicked his tongue. "To put it bluntly, he's not like the average monk. At first, I couldn't figure out what made him different, but thinking about it now, monks have a warmth about them borne from their strict adherence to their precepts. He had none of that. Didn't you feel it too? That he might be willing to take lives?"

Jiang Shining considered this for a moment, then shook his head. "Not really. But, to be honest, I *was* a little scared of him."

"There you have it," snapped Xue Xian. "It's the same thing."

Now that he'd mentioned not knowing where Xuanmin was from, Jiang Shining remembered something. "By the way, did you smell medicine in the room earlier?"

"I did. I was also a bit confused. Was he taking something?"

"I grew up smelling medicine, so I'm quite sensitive to it." Jiang Shining thought some more, then added, "I'm somewhat familiar with that exact smell—we had a neighbor who used to come to the clinic for treatment. That's what it reminded me of."

"What was it used to treat?"

Jiang Shining hesitated for a moment. "Dissociation."

People with dissociation often suffered from insomnia and experienced nightmares. Sometimes they'd wake up forgetting what

happened, their memories fragmented, almost as if their souls had left their bodies entirely. Hence the alternative name: soul loss syndrome.

"Dissociation? That bald donkey?" Xue Xian scoffed and waved dismissively. "He didn't at all seem like someone plagued by nightmares, nor was his mind unclear. Impossible."

"True, he didn't seem to be suffering from amnesia, but… Sometimes the dissociation symptoms are obvious—as their memories are missing or scrambled, the patient will hesitate when recounting events, and they'll act listless. That's not the case for everyone. Maybe because certain individuals are naturally more guarded, they'll be cautious around strangers and watch their words. By only talking about what they know, they disguise the gaps in their memories. Unless you know them well, it's difficult to tell anything's wrong."

Xue Xian shrugged. "But those guarded types you speak of wouldn't recklessly wander around, right? Since they don't want anyone to notice anything amiss, they'd be extra cautious and avoid contact with others. That way they can avoid slipping up. What amnesiac would travel alone and run around meddling with the affairs of people and ghosts? That's not soul loss syndrome anymore. It'd be sanity loss syndrome."

"True," Jiang Shining said.

"Still, even if he's not suffering from dissociation, he has some other problems." Xue Xian thought of how Xuanmin had stopped in mid-sentence and clutched at the table. "Someone with murky origins and unclear motives wouldn't wander for no reason, so he must need something in Ningyang County. Yet, today, he only did two things, neither of which were his business. First, he captured us, and second, he dismantled the Liu family's feng shui array."

Jiang Shining couldn't help adding, "He also laid Old Lady Liu's spirit to rest, helped me find the medical bell, retrieved your golden marble, and—"

He hesitated. Upon review, the motives behind Xuanmin's actions became even murkier. It'd be one thing if they'd been simple tasks, but the

matters had kept him in the Liu residence for the entire morning, costing him much time and effort. Just what had been his goal?

"Earlier, he hinted that he wanted to finish the job and bring the bell to your sister." Xue Xian fiddled with his marble. "As it happens, I've been to Anqing. It's not far from Ningyang, just across a river. Don't you think that's a bit too familiar, too friendly for someone lending a helping hand with no ulterior motives? That bald donkey's face is practically carved from ice. Is there anything friendly about it at all?"

Picturing what a friendly bald donkey might look like, Xue Xian felt a chill shoot from his head all the way down his back.

"Help me," he said flatly. "It's too scary."

Jiang Shining decided to keep his mouth shut. Xue Xian didn't look trustworthy in the slightest himself, but his words did make sense. Although, speaking of helping others without motive…

Jiang Shining looked over at Xue Xian. "When you first came to Ningyang County, you made me a paper body and nothing more…"

"That's different."

"I still don't see your logic. There are so many houses in Ningyang County, so why choose our family's ruined clinic?" Jiang Shining shook his head. "It was cold and dark. Do you enjoy torturing yourself? Your tastes sure are interesting."

"I wanted to, that's all," Xue Xian retorted. "How would you stop me?"

Not only was Jiang Shining always on the receiving end of Xue Xian's sharp words, but Xue Xian wouldn't even look at whomever he was demeaning. Currently, his entire focus lay on his precious marble.

The candle's warm yellow glow lent a bit of life to Xue Xian's ashen complexion. Though his smug mouth was begging for a beating, he did have a remarkable appearance. The flame cast a soft shadow beneath his long black lashes, and the lazy curve of his eyes shone with the marble's golden, candlelit glow, as well as the fierce blizzard raging outside.

With so many places to shelter oneself in Ningyang County, why had Xue Xian chosen the Jiang family clinic? He had even wasted an entire day crafting a paper body for Jiang Shining.

In truth, Xue Xian had only a vague recollection of the reason he did it. His lifespan was so much longer than a human's. If he tried to list every little detail of what he'd done, his head would explode. He only remembered that one winter, he'd traveled north for some reason, and he'd passed through Ningyang County on his return trip.

It was around evening then, and the county was being buffeted by a rare blizzard, not unlike the one today. The tavern food stalls packed up early, leaving the streets deathly silent.

At that time, Xue Xian wasn't maimed yet, so he had full use of his legs, and of course a dragon would never fear the cold. To him, the wind and snow were little more than winter embellishments. Clad in a thin black robe, he strolled through the flurries.

Just as he passed by an alley, someone grabbed his arm.

Xue Xian was a lone wolf in nature. He disliked being too close to others, and he was even more displeased when someone tugged on him unexpectedly. Frowning in annoyance, he turned and saw a middle-aged man in a gray robe who had an oilpaper umbrella in hand. A square medicine chest was slung over his shoulder with a cloth strap. Judging by the footprints in the snow, he'd come from the alley. Xue Xian could no longer recall the man's appearance clearly, only that he had a beard and a kind face.

The man pointed to the back of Xue Xian's hand. "Such a deep wound! You have to apply medicine and bandage it, or you'll end up with a severe case of frostbite. Two days of frostbite in this damp, cold weather, and it'll hurt every year when it rains and snows. You'll regret it then."

The man's voice had a coaxing tone that lacked formality, as if talking to a young member of his family.

Taken aback, Xue Xian peered down at his hand. The hand in the man's grip really *was* injured—the result of a careless brush with lightning. To Xue Xian, the injury was comparable to being scratched by a branch while walking, something one would forget in no time. A couple of days and it'd be as good as new. However, to an ordinary person, it was a horrific injury: The back of his hand had been split open and blood had crusted on the edges of the wound, where the flesh curled outward, exposing the bone beneath.

Without further ado, the man pulled the bewildered Xue Xian along, urging him down the alley. A short trip later, they stopped at a pair of red gates. Xue Xian assumed it was the man's home since he pushed open one of the gates and shouted someone's name inside.

"Oh, and bring me the brazier by my desk!" the man added. Then, he opened his wooden medicine chest and began to carefully treat Xue Xian's wound.

Someone came from inside the building and handed over a small copper brazier. Xue Xian noted the person in question was a middle-aged woman. Like the man, she seemed gentle. Behind her was a young boy about seven or eight years old. His head craned forward as he peered around her. When his eyes met Xue Xian's, he smiled, then pointed to Xue Xian's hand.

"You have to keep it away from water for two days," the boy said in a grave voice. "Especially cold water."

"Go back in and study," the woman said with a smile, turning to shoo the child away. To Xue Xian, she said, "You really *should* keep it away from water, especially in this weather. You must be careful, or chronic pain will bother you year in and year out." Just as the man had said.

"Are you in a hurry? Would you like to come in and warm up?" the man asked, his tone friendly. While the others had talked, he'd bound Xue Xian's hand with a strip of finely woven hemp, and even neatly avoided the painful areas as he tied a firm knot.

"No, I still have matters to attend to," replied Xue Xian. He paused for a moment, then awkwardly added, "Thank you for your trouble."

“At least take this brazier with you. You need to keep that wound warm,” the man insisted. He shoved the palm-sized object into Xue Xian’s hand.

Xue Xian might not have feared the cold, but he could still distinguish between it and heat. When the warm brazier was pressed into his palm, he looked up at the doorframe and read the characters inscribed there: *Jiang Family Clinic*.

A year later, when he found himself passing through Ningyang again, he slipped into the Jiang family courtyard when no one was watching. After placing the copper brazier and a small pouch of golden pearls on the stone table outside, he strolled away.

Upon returning to the county this last time, he remembered the clinic and decided to take a look, only to find it in ruins. The once-red gates and the herb garden in the courtyard had been marred beyond recognition; all that remained was Jiang Shining.

Thus, he felt compelled to help. After all, not everyone in this world was as treacherous and reprehensible as Scribe Liu. Where some were selfish and ungrateful, others were full of kindness and virtue.

Xue Xian glanced at the raging blizzard outside and leaned against the statue of Buddha.

“Before we left, you told me to wait by the door while you did something at the Master’s table,” Jiang Shining asked. “What did you do?”

Xue Xian lazily grunted in acknowledgment. “Just left him a little something. A token of gratitude for his help in retrieving my marble.”

What he’d granted Xuanmin was none other than a piece of his real body—a dragon scale. While it couldn’t bring the dead back to life, it was still part of a genuine dragon, and far more precious than ingredients like mountain ginseng or lingzhi mushrooms. He didn’t know the reason for the man’s health issues, but adding dragon scales to his medicine could only help.

Most people wouldn't recognize a dragon scale on sight. It was round and thin, around the size of an elm leaf, and carried a dark green luster. A subtle aroma wafted from it, reminiscent of rainwater on mountain stones and full of an indescribable sweetness, like the translucent flesh of a freshly peeled shrimp.

Xue Xian opened his eyes. "I'm a little hungry," he muttered.

Meanwhile, in the first-class suite on the second floor of Guiyun Hall, Xuanmin continued to sit at the table, his eyes closed. He remained frozen in the posture he'd been in when Xue Xian left.

On the table before him was a sheet of yellow paper. Upon it rested the dragon scale left by Xue Xian, its scent slowly fanning out until it reached his nose.

Xuanmin frowned, and his eyes snapped open. The spiderlike mole on his neck rapidly receded, returning to its original appearance.

He glanced down at the table to see several large characters scrawled sloppily on the yellow paper: *Mystical medicine, can cure anything. Believe it or not.*

Xuanmin picked up the dark round disc lying next to the scribbles. Abruptly, as if remembering something important, he pulled a folded sheet of paper from his lapels. He opened it and smoothed it out, revealing two characters at the top: *Find them.*

Next to those characters was a sketch of a round, dark disc, identical to the object on the table.

"Find them…"

Xuanmin furrowed his brows and compared the two, then refolded the note and tucked it away. Holding the object Xue Xian had left to him, Xuanmin sat quietly beneath the candlelight.

Outside the window, the chill winds swirled with snow, knocking gently on the doorframe. From the mountain paths to the city alleys, darkness unfurled, endless and winding.

ARC 2

NAMELESS

Chapter 10:
The Blind Fortune Teller

THE SNOW FELL IN STOPS and starts for a full day and night. For Xue Xian and Jiang Shining, this brought both advantages and disadvantages.

As the snow continued, the sky thronged with dark clouds, rendering yang energy scarce and yin energy plentiful. Since Jiang Shining, the one saddled with all the labor, was a spirit that feared yang energy, this eased his travels greatly. No longer did daytime render him immobile.

Then there were the disadvantages…

"Shield my face with your hand! Hurry! The wind is about to blow my head away!" Xue Xian shouted with all his might.

Obviously, he couldn't remain perched on Jiang Shining's shoulder during a gale. In his desperation, Jiang Shining had no choice but to tuck Xue Xian into his lapels, leaving only the latter's head exposed so he could issue his orders. However, the infernal wind refused to play by the rules. As it continued to roar and buffet them from all sides, Xue Xian's temper flared.

Grimacing, Jiang Shining raised his hand to shield Xue Xian's head and struggled to move against the wind. "Why not tuck that precious head of yours all the way into my clothes?"

"Absolutely not," Xue Xian said. "You'll take a wrong turn the moment I stop paying attention." Bold words from someone with no sense of direction, but he continued with a sneer, "The moment you enter the city, you'll be wailing and asking me which way to go."

Jiang Shining pushed on without answering.

They were headed to Wolong County, two cities over from Ningyang County. The place was by a river and home to an old ferry crossing. With only a few boats arriving and departing each day, it wasn't a large crossing, nor was it the only way to get to Anqing Prefecture. They'd actually chosen to cross the river there because Xue Xian was looking for someone.

“There’s a family that lives to the east of the crossing,” Xue Xian told Jiang Shining. “Two brothers, though they’re not very close. I’ve been there twice, and both times I saw them bickering. The older brother knows a trick or two, so I want him to take a look at my marble. Perhaps he can tell me the whereabouts of the man who sold it to Scribe Liu.”

Since Xue Xian had been to them twice, the other party was sure to be a reliable expert in his craft, so Jiang Shining had no objections. He headed toward Wolong County.

To avoid the hassle of entering and exiting the city, they bypassed the two county towns in between, traveling entirely along the mountain routes. They were a dragon and a ghost, two creatures used to travel by night. Logically speaking, they had little to fear.

Nonetheless, rumors spoke of bandits who lurked around the mountains and forests here. Nothing formidable, but they’d still pose some trouble for travelers. As Xue Xian carried his golden marble, Jiang Shining remained on high alert, fearing that they’d run into a gang or two and be torn from limb to paper limb.

When Jiang Shining noticed the signs of past fighting—deep cuts from blades and axes etched into the crumbling walls of the run-down temples where they rested, dried dark red bloodstains at the corners of the doors—his worries intensified. But for some reason, perhaps because they’d taken a different route, they didn’t encounter a single bandit along the way. Occasionally, they even came across a passing carriage or two which they hitched a ride on in paper form.

In short, their journey was uneventful to an almost unsettling degree. When they arrived outside the city gates on the fourth day, Jiang Shining was still in disbelief.

“Was our luck just that good?”

Xue Xian looked up at the gates. “Everyone else is terrified of plundering bandits and wants them to stay away. You’re the only person who spends his entire day hoping to meet one.”

Upon the gates were inscribed three giant characters that marked Wolong County. Jiang Shining read them aloud, then remarked, “They say

any location bearing ‘dragon’ in its name has witnessed a dragon sighting before. Wolong—*resting dragon*. Sounds like a real one once slumbered here.”

Xue Xian snorted. “This puny county city? There’s barely enough space for one of my feet, let alone to take a nap!”

Jiang Shining stared at him in confusion. “Uh, I wasn’t talking about you?”

They’d arrived just in time for the end of the night watch. The sound of bells tolling from the city echoed through the air, resounding outward. When the fifth wave of peals faded, the gates slowly swung open.

As the guards opened the gates, Jiang Shining ducked into a corner, planning to slip through the gap in paper form while the sky was still dark. That way, he could avoid the potential troubles that would come with being questioned. But just as he stepped backward, he felt something poke at his heel.

“What’s wrong?” Xue Xian asked.

Jiang Shining squatted down and brushed away the snowdrift next to his footprint, then pulled out a slightly deformed piece of iron.

By the light of the lantern on the city wall, Xue Xian squinted at the object. It was roughly the size of a thumb, with one side bearing a crude engraving of a wolf’s head. On the other side a name was inscribed but had been scratched out, rendering it impossible to read.

“Another one,” Jiang Shining muttered as he pulled out a similar piece from his lapels. He’d found it beneath the statue of that rundown temple, the surface marred with a single drop of blood. Like its twin, it bore a scratched-out name that was completely illegible. “Well, let’s keep it for now.”

Jiang Shining put both pieces away and tarried no longer. While the guards were distracted, he slipped through the gate and into the city.

The moment they were inside, Jiang Shining froze.

Wolong County looked nothing like Ningyang County. He couldn't see a single straight road—instead, the streets twisted and turned, crossing over and under each other like a chaotic labyrinth. Finally, Jiang Shining gave up and looked down at Xue Xian.

"Which way should we go?"

Xue Xian, who was still proudly clutching his golden marble, gave an exaggerated sweep of his head.

"At the first intersection, you'll find the Zhang family's fried flatbread shop to the east. Take the diagonal road it's on."

"See that sesame cake shop? Turn west at that corner."

"Find the side road with the smell of fresh wontons. Yes, that one. Take it."

After weaving through several streets, Jiang Shining found himself driven to hunger by Xue Xian's directions. As a wandering ghost, he had no idea how long it'd been since he last felt his stomach rumble.

"Does your directionally challenged mind only remember the way through food?" he asked, his voice devoid of inflection.

Xue Xian nodded. "Yes. Walk more and talk less. It's almost dawn. Next is a braised pork shop and a restaurant called Baishun. Once we pass those, we're there!"

Jiang Shining rolled his eyes.

As annoying as Xue Xian was, he'd pointed out the quickest way there. Sure enough, after passing by the restaurant, Jiang Shining caught sight of the ferry crossing cloaked in mist and snow in the distance. Its flag fluttered in the wind, and a few passenger boats were docked by the shore.

Jiang Shining tucked his hands into his sleeves and held them up to cover the paper doll peeking from his clothes. Huddled like that, he walked windward toward the area east of the crossing.

"Wise One, can you sit still and stop moving? If the wind blows you away, I'm not going to retrieve you," grumbled Jiang Shining.

Xue Xian turned to study the street beside them. After several glances, he clicked his tongue. “I feel like someone is following us.”

Jiang Shining stopped and turned in a circle, surveying his surroundings. “I don’t see anyone suspicious,” he said. “Maybe you’re seeing things from all the snowflakes blowing into your eyes.”

“Maybe,” muttered Xue Xian. He pulled back and forced himself to settle down. If someone was really following them, they’d hear their footsteps crunching in the snow. It didn’t make sense that they’d heard nothing. He must have been overthinking it…

Under Xue Xian’s guidance, Jiang Shining quickly arrived at a secluded compound in the neighborhood. Well, calling it a compound was being generous. From the outside, the yard appeared so small that it resembled a chicken coop. The gates were more of a single, weathered door, with mold creeping into the corners due to humidity. No one had bothered tending to it. Clearly, the household here wasn’t too well off.

“Give it a knock,” said Xue Xian.

Everything Jiang Shining did was full of restraint—even knocking on a door.

Three soft and gentle sounds later, Xue Xian gritted his teeth and said, “Those brothers won’t hear your mosquito taps. One of them is deaf in one ear. Let yourself loose and pound away.”

Resigned, Jiang Shining knocked more forcefully, though he muttered “Sorry, sorry” the whole time.

After a long while, the crunch of footsteps came from inside the courtyard. Perhaps the snow was hindering them, because the steps sounded oddly…unsteady?

“How old are these brothers?” Jiang Shining couldn’t help but ask.

“Oh, the younger brother is about eight or nine, and the elder is around sixteen or seventeen,” Xue Xian replied.

“What? You’re getting a *child* to tell your fortune?”

Before Jiang Shining could recover, the old wooden door swung inward. A youthful yell came from within the compound.

“Thief! Get lost!”

There was the sound of a loud splash as a large basin of water was hurled at Jiang Shining, drenching him from head to toe before he could react.

Jiang Shining’s body was made of paper. Once soaked, he shuddered and his entire body crumpled to the ground. Tucked in his clothes, Xue Xian fared no better. He landed with a plop on the damp ground, thoroughly drenched. The golden marble he’d been holding rolled away, coming to a halt before the door.

The person inside tossed aside the basin with a crash. After a moment of hesitation, they snatched up the golden marble by the door and tried to close it.

Just as Xue Xian, plastered to the ground, was about to explode in rage and start cursing, a warm hand descended from above and plucked him off the ground.

The familiar scent of medicine, bitter and astringent, hung about that hand. Xue Xian broke out sneezing straight away. With his soggy head drooping and impossible to hold up, he roared, “Bald donkey! Did I dig up your ancestors’ grave or disturb your tomb? Why are you so obsessed with capturing me?! Aren’t you *tired* after chasing me halfway across the damn country? Huh?!”

“Thank you for your concern. I’m not tired,” Xuanmin said, sounding both cold and indifferent.

Xue Xian saw red as he imagined hacking up blood. He wanted to dunk Xuanmin’s head into the river!

It really was none other than Xuanmin standing next to door of this chicken-coop-like courtyard. While holding the soaking wet paper Xue Xian in one hand, Xuanmin plucked the equally soggy paper Jiang Shining from the ground, then unceremoniously pushed open the door. Striding into the courtyard, he quickly caught the fleeing little thief.

“Don’t covet what isn’t yours,” he said calmly, looking down at whom he’d grabbed. “Return the marble.”

Xuanmin was tall; the thief barely reached his waist, cutting the perfect image of a gangly monkey. He seemed around eight or nine. Hanging by the collar, he flailed around in his panic but couldn’t hit Xuanmin at all.

“Help! Robbery! Ahhhh, let go!” the young boy cried, desperate.

A thief screaming “thief” with such brazenness was certainly a first. Xue Xian had to admire his audacity.

Unfortunately for you, kid, this guy is an under-socialized freak who doesn’t discriminate between gender and age, completely unlike your average monk, Xue Xian thought.

Xuanmin dangled the thief while pulling a talisman from his robe. “Silence,” he said as he slapped it to the crown of the boy’s head.

The vigorous yelling came to an abrupt stop, and the thief’s face slowly flushed crimson from strain as he was forcibly silenced.

Xue Xian pressed a damp hand to his mouth, feeling a tiny bit sorry for the child. Unfortunately, thanks to the soaked, structureless paper forming his body, his hand ended up stuck where he’d pressed it. If he ripped it away, he’d probably lose either a hand or a mouth—dreadful either way.

At that moment, Xuanmin happened to glance over and see Xue Xian locked in that unflattering pose. Speechless, Xue Xian squeezed his eyes shut. A lifetime of reputation, ruined in an instant.

Someone should bring a rope to hang that bald donkey. Then no one will know about this shameful appearance of mine.

Xuanmin returned his attention to the boy he was holding. “Your hands.”

The talisman on the thief’s forehead twitched, and with a defeated look, he extended both hands.

When Xuanmin took the golden marble from the boy, his face flushed from red to a deep scarlet, either from shame or anger, the color crawling all the way down to his neck. Even the rims of his eyes reddened. Yet his expression remained as obstinate as ever, as if he were saying, *Beat me to death if you dare!*

It really did make fulfilling his request tempting.

His goal achieved, Xuanmin let the boy go and removed the talisman from his forehead, then folded the paper and put it away. Xue Xian stared at the marble in Xuanmin's hand, waiting for him to pass it over.

Xue Xian hadn't expected the bald donkey to help him. What tiny wisp of conscience he had flickered within him. *Fine. Once I get the marble back, I'll try behaving for a couple of days. Let him off the hook for a while. I'll even give him another dragon scale if it comes to that. I still have a few.*

However, after Xuanmin briefly inspected the marble, his brows knitted. There was an indescribable oddness to his expression in that instant, as if he were wavering between contemplation and confusion. He stared at the marble for a moment longer and rubbed it with his thumb, then leaned down to sniff at it, still frowning.

Xue Xian rolled his eyes back, feeling uneasy. Fortunately, his body had yet to recover, leaving him unable to establish a connection with the marble, otherwise he would have kicked Xuanmin in the face for all that rubbing and sniffing. A storm of curses welled up inside him, but with his hand stuck to his mouth, he couldn't say a single thing. He was forced to swallow them all, almost choking himself in the process.

Luckily, Xuanmin's strange behavior didn't last long. After a brief sniff, he lifted his head and his expression returned to its usual indifference once more. He was silent for a second before he said to Xue Xian, "I'll hold onto your marble for now. Have you any objections?"

I do! No way! In your dreams! Xue Xian screamed in his heart, but nothing came out of his mouth.

"Good." Xuanmin took the paper doll's silence for consent and placed the marble into his pouch, right against his hip. It rubbed uncomfortably against him with every moment, but that also made it difficult to lose.

Xue Xian wilted like a dead flower, no longer in the mood to do anything. He wasn't afraid that Xuanmin would steal his marble, but his body had been missing for half a year, and he'd finally managed to find it. Being forced to relinquish it again was more than a little vexing.

After fumbling around, Xuanmin noticed how odd Xue Xian's pose was, locked into the gesture of covering his mouth—he hadn't even switched hands. He was momentarily taken aback before realizing the reason for Xue Xian's docility, but he didn't move to help.

"Have you a brazier?" Xuanmin asked the thief after a short silence.

Despite his audacity in stealing Xue Xian's marble, the thief was still a young boy, and Xuanmin's discipline had left him a little intimidated. He dared not ignore Xuanmin's question. Reluctantly, after a sidelong glance at the monk, the boy ran into the kitchen. They could all hear the clattering of his rummaging. A moment later, he returned, dragging a dented copper brazier, which he carelessly dropped for Xuanmin with a clang.

"Thank you," Xuanmin said.

Two bundles of firewood were piled in a relatively dry corner beneath the eaves. Unlike the firewood one would see in most households, the bundled sticks here were scraggly and crooked—clearly of poor quality. Xuanmin snapped off a couple dry twigs and lit them with a fire starter, then tossed them into the brazier. The branches took some time to catch fire, but they eventually flared in flame, bringing some warmth to the little courtyard.

For a while, the boy stubbornly ignored Xuanmin, until he eventually succumbed to the warmth of the fire. Without a word, he scooted closer to the brazier and discreetly rubbed his hands.

Xuanmin had draped Xue Xian and Jiang Shining on an overhanging branch of a magnolia tree, just far enough from the fire to avoid being singed, yet still close enough to capitalize on the warmth. The toasty heat of the fire was quite effective on wet paper. Xue Xian felt himself slowly drying.

Dangling from the branch, he watched as Xuanmin pulled out a sheet of folded paper from another hidden pouch in his clothes. From Xue Xian's perspective, all he could see was that the paper was covered in writing: some characters in neat rows, some off by their lonesome. There were also…drawings?

Xuanmin looked at a certain part of the page, then neatly folded it back up and put it away.

"Your family name is Lu?" he asked the young thief.

Both Xue Xian and the thief startled.

Warily, the boy peered at Xuanmin. "What do you want?"

That expression told Xuanmin everything. "Looks like it. So, do you have a blind brother?"

The thief Lu's eyes watered. "Who are you?! What do you want with Lu—I mean, what do you want with him?!"

Xue Xian looked at Xuanmin in confusion. So, he wasn't just here to capture Xue Xian? Was he also seeking someone? Could it really be a coincidence?

As Xue Xian pondered this, the water soaking his mouth and hand was sufficiently wicked away by the heat, and his hand fell from his mouth with a plop. He could speak again.

"Where is Lu Shijiu?" Xue Xian cut in immediately. "I want him to track someone using an object."

He had been to this place twice before and was roughly acquainted with the Lu brothers who lived here. Their parents and older relatives had all passed away under mysterious circumstances. He'd heard that one brother was blind from birth and possessed some knowledge of yin-yang arts, while the other had impaired hearing from an earlier injury. The boys only had each other to depend on through the years, but their relationship was strained. As they lacked older kin and were unable to establish families of their own, the two brothers didn't even have proper names, just nicknames based on their birth dates. The older brother was called Lu Shijiu —*nineteen.* The younger one, around eight or nine, was called Lu Nianqi— *twenty-seven.*

Though young, Lu Nianqi had none of a child's naive air. "I recognize you. At least your voice," he said. "You were here for Shijiu."

He was used to seeing all manner of strange and supernatural phenomena thanks to Lu Shijiu, so a talking paper doll didn't leave him

speechless with terror. Instead, he was rather composed.

"I've been here twice, but this is my first time receiving such a grand gift." Xue Xian pictured the basin splashing over himself and snorted. "Enough, let's stay on topic. Where's Lu Shijiu? Where did he go? When will he return? And why are you stealing from others?"

He'd barely finished when Lu Nianqi started to cry without warning. Tears as large as beans rolled down his cheeks. "I'm looking for him too. I've been searching for over half a month. He… He's in the river."

Okay, what does that even mean, "in the river"? Xue Xian asked himself.

Lu Nianqi wiped away his tears and his previous mulish look returned. Tugging at his clothes, he avoided eye contact with Xuanmin and Xue Xian to stare at the dwindling flames of the brazier. "About half a month ago, Lu Shijiu told me that he was taking a trip to Fentou Island in the middle of the river…"

Chapter 11:
Fentou Island

COMPARED TO THE STRETCHES of river on either side, the section near Wolong County was shallower and narrower, with small islets scattered in its middle. Most of those islets were tiny—if the Lu brothers' run-down compound were placed on one, there'd be scarcely any space left. Most of the shoals were swathed in fine cogon grass; usually, they served little purpose beyond offering resting spots for waterfowl. Only one of them was barely large enough to be called an island.

This island was choked with sprawling forests, their branches twisting and interlocked. When looked upon from afar, it resembled a green bun, or a burial mound, perhaps. Thus, the locals called it either Mantou Island or Fentou Island—meaning *bun* or *grave*, respectively.

With its dense overgrowth of wild grass and trees, most people had little desire to go to Fentou Island. It was dark and desolate, not at all inviting. The only people who did visit were the pharmacists from nearby villages. The soil on Fentou Island was fertile and moist, so many medicinal herbs grew there. Lu Shijiu had been there two or three times.

One crisp morning, about half a month ago, Lu Nianqi had opened his eyes and found a note beside his bed. Lu Shijiu didn't know how to use a brush, and he usually wrote by dipping his finger in ink, so his handwriting was easily identifiable. The note comprised a single crooked line: *Went to Fentou Island.*

As outsiders had noticed, the Lu brothers weren't close. Lu Nianqi was prickly, with a difficult personality, while Lu Shijiu was eccentric and reticent. It wasn't unusual for him to up and leave with just a note. At first, Lu Nianqi hadn't thought much of it. He angrily started a fire to cook and gathered some firewood, waiting for Lu Shijiu to return. He waited and waited, all the way until nightfall when it started to rain, and still he saw no sign of Lu Shijiu.

“I went to the crossing, and the boatman there said the rain was too heavy for him to go to the island,” Lu Nianqi explained. Despite his young age, he was clear and articulate. “He also said Shijiu had boarded Old Man Liu’s black-awning boat, and Old Man Liu hadn’t returned either, so they were most likely taking shelter from the rain there. I sort of saw fishing lanterns in the middle of the river, so I figured they really were taking shelter and went back. But then…”

But then the rain continued for three days, until even the river had swollen. Lu Nianqi went to the crossing every day to check the fishing lanterns before returning home, anxiously waiting for the rain to stop. He scrounged up a few copper coins and found a passenger boat at the crossing, then traveled to Fentou Island in the center but found neither Lu Shijiu nor Old Man Liu.

“I searched almost every inch of Fentou Island but couldn’t find him. But, just once, I did hear his voice,” Lu Nianqi said. “When I called out to him, the voice disappeared.”

Lu Nianqi traveled to and from Fentou Island six or seven times, yet never found Lu Shijiu. A few days ago, a small whirlpool had cropped up near Fentou Island, capsizing two passenger boats. The boatmen were reluctant to go again. No matter how Lu Nianqi pleaded, they refused.

More infuriatingly, for the past few days, Lu Nianqi had heard knocking at the door early in the morning and late at night. The first two times he thought it was Lu Shijiu returning, so he hurried to open the door, only to find no one outside. After looking around and returning to his room, he noticed that one of the chests within seemed to have been moved.

“It contained the four strings of money we’d saved up, and they were all gone! Not a single coin left! How am I supposed to pay the boatmen now?!” Saying this, Lu Nianqi bristled like a wild dog, his hackles rising.

Xue Xian clicked his tongue. “So *that’s* why you splashed me with water after opening the door. What shameless asshole would steal from a kid who’s just eight or nine? Though, just because your money got stolen doesn’t mean you can steal my marble! What kind of logic is that? You’re lucky I can’t walk right now, or I’d dunk you upside down into the river.”

“Who’s eight or nine?” Lu Nianqi retorted, his face red with embarrassment.

“You, of course!” Xue Xian snapped. “Who else could it be?”

“I’m fifteen!” yelled Lu Nianqi, both agitated and angry. “I was ill as a child and it stunted my growth. Don’t randomly assume someone’s age from their face!”

Xue Xian was a little surprised, but the age and height of this bad-tempered, unlucky child were not his concern. He was more interested in whether Lu Shijiu was alive.

He wasn’t the only one who thought this. Xuanmin swept his sleeves, extinguishing the dwindling flames in the brazier with a soft whoosh, leaving only dark curling smoke. That done, he reached through the smoke and plucked Xue Xian and Jiang Shining from their branch. Both paper dolls had been dried by the fire and were undamaged. The sole imperfection was that the ink delineating their faces had smudged a little.

Jiang Shining hurriedly reverted to human form. He now bore even darker circles under his eyes, more pronounced than before; they seemed to cover half his cheeks, vividly depicting a patient at death’s door.

Somehow, Xue Xian had fared worse. With his paralyzed legs, being in human form was inconvenient, so he usually stayed a doll—but the smudged ink was stark on his paper face, running down from the corners of his eyes and nose. Whereas before, he had resembled a wide-eyed corpse, he now looked like one that was bleeding from every orifice. It was quite an unpleasant sight.

Xuanmin took one look at Xue Xian and shoved him right back into the pouch. His cold expression had taken on a hint of numbness, as if he wished to wipe Xue Xian from his mind.

Seeing the icy monk about to leave, Lu Nianqi couldn’t resist asking, “Where are you going?”

“To the river’s center,” replied Xuanmin.

Lu Nianqi leaped to his feet at his words. “Are you going to look for Lu Shijiu? Can you take me along? I want to go too!”

“Suit yourself.” Xuanmin tossed out those clipped words without turning his head and strode toward the crossing.

It’d been a while since Xue Xian had stayed in the pouch. He discovered that its contents had expanded. Other than his precious golden marble and the cloth bag of needles, there was a smattering of objects that were hard to the touch. Xue Xian sidled toward one, felt it up, then took a bite.

Silver pieces. And a lot of them. Where had they come from?

When they reached the crossing, it was shrouded in snow and fog, with a few passenger boats docked. The boatmen were likely huddled beneath the awnings, making for a desolate scene.

Xuanmin rang one of the copper bells hanging from the flags. Several boatmen peeked out from under their awnings. “The fog is too thick,” one of them drawled. “We can’t cross the river. Come back later.”

“We’re not crossing.” Xuanmin pointed into the river. “I want to go to Fentou Island.”

The moment he said this, the boatmen shook their heads and retreated back under the awnings without another word. Only one boatman was amenable enough to offer an explanation. “Young shifu, you’re not a local, are you? A whirlpool near Fentou Island capsized some boats recently. Whatever you wish to do, I advise you go elsewhere. No boatman is willing to go there.”

Xuanmin let him finish, then asked, “How much would it cost to rent the boat alone?”

The boatman was stunned. Beautifully decorated pleasure boats were common rental targets, but rarely did people seek to rent these black-awning boats. After all, such passenger boats were narrow and difficult to steer. Without a boatman, few would be able to safely row them to the opposite shore.

“That’s…” The boatman hesitated.

Xue Xian took two silver pieces from within the pouch and held them to the pouch's opening without a word.

Xuanmin didn't say anything either, but he grabbed the silver that Xue Xian had dug out, pressed his paper hand back down, and handed the silver to the boatman without further delay.

However, Xue Xian didn't stop his troublemaking even after being shoved back inside the pouch. He patted Xuanmin's hip. "It's hard for me to pay when I look like this. But I won't mooch off you, so don't worry. I'll pay you back twice the amount after."

As a reply, Xuanmin treated him like he didn't exist.

The boatman took the silver. Even without weighing it, he could tell it was no small amount. "I can't take this much," he said, a little embarrassed.

However, Xuanmin's face was so cold, more chilling than the snow blowing around them, that the boatman saw that he had no intention of changing his mind. He reluctantly stepped off the boat, allowing Xuanmin's group to board.

Before they left, he anxiously asked, "Do you really know how to steer a boat?"

Lu Nianqi shared the boatman's concerns, but he was afraid that Xuanmin would change his mind if Lu Nianqi asked more questions. Quashing his doubts, he followed Xuanmin and Jiang Shining onto the boat, though his gaze was mistrustful.

Before boarding, Xuanmin snapped off a piece of reed. Lu Nianqi was busy puzzling over the purpose of the reed when Xuanmin pulled a folded talisman from his lapels. He slapped it onto the bow of the black-awning boat and declared "Set sail," before lowering the reed into the water. The small boat began to move in response, slowly gliding through the water. Xuanmin shook the reed gently, and the boat changed direction, heading straight toward the cluster of islets in the center of the river.

Lu Nianqi stared at the familiar yellow talisman until he remembered that it was the same one Xuanmin had plastered to his forehead earlier.

Do you use the same spell for everything? Lu Nianqi thought, indignant. *You one-trick pony!*

Even with the talisman commanding the boat and the reed steering its direction, Xue Xian couldn't shake his anxiety about Xuanmin. He discreetly peeked out from the pouch, his gaze fixed on the reed clutched in Xuanmin's hand.

After watching for a while, Xue Xian asked, "What do you want with Lu Shijiu? Do you also want to track someone through an object?"

"Ah!" Lu Nianqi suddenly exclaimed before Xuanmin could respond.

What was he fussing over now? Xue Xian tracked the sound of the noise.

Lu Nianqi had been standing by the boat's edge and watching the waters, but for some reason, he'd stumbled backward and fallen onto the deck, startled. He braced himself on the deck with his palm, only to cry out in pain and whip his hand away—but it was too late. A cut had opened on his right palm and was weeping blood.

"What happened?" Jiang Shining grabbed Lu Nianqi's wrist and pressed his thumb above the wound. "What cut you?"

"I think it was a piece of metal." Lu Nianqi shivered at Jiang Shining's icy fingers and instinctively yanked his hand back.

There was indeed a piece of metal lodged in the deck's wooden grain where he'd fallen, complete with a splash of blood. It was the culprit.

Jiang Shining glanced around, then picked up the wine jug that the boatman had left behind. "It'll hurt a little, but just bear with it," he said. He uncorked the jug and poured a generous amount of wine over Lu Nianqi's palm.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Lu Nianqi was clearly unprepared, as he started screaming his lungs out. "Ow ow ow ow *ow*! It stings! Haaah! Ugh…"

"Stop whining. Deal with it." Having grown up in a clinic, Jiang Shining was used to people wailing and remained remarkably calm.

It was freezing cold; the snow and fog had yet to recede. The alcohol quickly chilled against Lu Nianqi's skin, stemming the flow of blood, though he continued to gasp with his palm outstretched. He frowned hard, his face twisted in an expression of agonized grievance.

Jiang Shining splashed some river water around the wound to wash away the blood, then shook the droplets from his own hand and stepped to the side.

With the blood gone, the lines on Lu Nianqi's palm became clear. Xuanmin saw this and frowned a little. He walked over and grabbed Lu Nianqi's wrist to inspect it.

Lu Nianqi couldn't help scoffing. "Another guy who likes to stare at palm lines," he said gruffly.

"What do you mean, another? Who else did this?" Xue Xian asked. He hadn't been paying attention and thought Xuanmin was just examining the kid's wound. A little interested, Xue Xian leaned over the pouch opening to scrutinize Lu Nianqi's palm lines and was stunned.

"Pah, Lu Shijiu, of course." Lu Nianqi had only called him "Shijiu" once in his panic earlier. Otherwise, he always referred to him using his full name.

"*Stare*…at palm lines?" Jiang Shining raised his head. From what Xue Xian had said, Lu Shijiu was blind, so what would he be staring at? He'd already found it odd that a blind person would venture alone to an island in the river so unceremoniously. What had he planned to do after getting there? Feel his way around?

Lu Nianqi understood the emphasis in his words. "It's true he's considered blind," he said with a twist of his lips. "But he can get by on his own, just slowly. He can see things ordinary people can't. 'Qi' and 'form,' to use his own words. It sounds like nonsense to me. I don't understand any of it."

To Xuanmin, Lu Nianqi asked, "What's wrong with my palm lines? He always takes my hand to study it for a while, tracing the lines and muttering strange things under his breath. It's so annoying. When I ask him what he means, he insists there's nothing wrong—that my palm says I'll

live a long life but suffer a tumultuous youth, so he's curious how bad things will get for me."

Hearing that, Jiang Shining thought that Lu Nianqi's older brother was truly something else. Did Lu Shijiu *want* Lu Nianqi to suffer?

A long life? Xue Xian stared at the palm lines. Had he misunderstood the definition of "long life" this entire time?

Lu Nianqi's palm actually bore the omen of an early death. His palm had three major lines, and one of them, the life line, ended abruptly. Never mind living a long life, he would be lucky if he lived past fifteen.

Xue Xian silently glanced at Lu Nianqi's face. He hadn't paid much attention to it, but upon a closer look, he noticed Lu Nianqi's sunken features, his lazy eye and listless gaze. Moles were also scattered between his brows—another sign of someone fated to live a short life. How had Lu Shijiu concluded that he'd be long-lived?

Although it was probably best not to reveal such a destiny to Lu Nianqi's face.

Xue Xian turned to look at Xuanmin. This old bald donkey had an illustrious history of being terrible at human communication. If he were to bluntly say something shocking like "You won't live long," this unfortunate child might faint from fright.

To Xue Xian's surprise, Xuanmin seemed to have gone through an epiphany. He knew to be careful.

"You turned fifteen this year?" he asked first.

"Mm."

Xuanmin nodded. "It's a calamitous year for you. Be careful when going out."

Xue Xian silently looked up at the sky, wondering if the sun had risen in the west today—or had Xuanmin eaten something strange?

Lu Nianqi withdrew his hand. "I know, I know. Lu Shijiu said the same thing."

“Oh, right! What were you shouting about earlier?” Xue Xian asked. Thanks to the distraction of Lu Nianqi’s bloodied palm, he’d almost forgotten what he wanted to know.

“N-nothing,” Lu Nianqi stammered. “I was standing by the edge of the boat and suddenly saw something black pass below us. I thought it was hair, but it was probably just river plants. If it were hair, the corpse would be floating on the river surface, not submerged underwater.”

“How do you know that? You’ve seen something like that before?”

“I have. I live by a river. Of course I’ve seen it before. We even have experts here who focus on retrieving corpses. There were a lot this year. I saw at least five just this autumn and winter.”

While Xue Xian and Lu Nianqi talked, Jiang Shining frowned off to the side, queasy from the boat’s rocking.

Snow and fog swirled thick over the river. A vast expanse of white stretched before them with no end in sight. However, the bun-shaped Fentou Island gradually became clearer in the mist, growing larger and larger.

Xuanmin stood at the bow, holding the reed as he steered, while Xue Xian rested his chin in his hand, his gaze wandering uneasily over the foggy river’s surface. Perhaps it was an illusion, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that his precious golden marble had grown livelier since it’d been in Xuanmin’s pouch. Xue Xian still couldn’t sense much of a connection from the marble, but the feeling of something, elusive and near-imperceptible, still hung about him. It felt like someone was about to tap him on the shoulder, that awareness in the moment when their fingers were only a hair’s breadth away.

As for Xuanmin’s influence on the marble, Xue Xian wasn’t against it. If the monk could genuinely help the dragon reconnect with his real body, he’d offer his sincere gratitude to Xuanmin’s entire lineage.

But how could Xue Xian speed up the process? That troubled him. He had previously harbored no expectations about restoring himself, but now that he had some hope, he found himself growing impatient. After all, his flimsy paper body was frail, liable to tear at a moment’s notice. That

would be embarrassing, and truly unbecoming of someone as divine and extraordinary as he.

He pondered for a moment longer before retreating into the pouch. Inside it, he squirmed about restlessly, moving himself to where the marble rested, then laid himself flat over it in a papery embrace.

The hemp acolyte robe was very thin—the pouch's inner layer pressed directly against Xuanmin's hip. As Xue Xian moved around, Xuanmin could naturally feel what he was doing. He pushed the reed through the water a little, then asked with a frown, "Why can you never sit still, evil spirit? What trouble are you up to now?"

"Just row your boat and mind your own business," came Xue Xian's muffled voice from the pouch. "I'm brooding an egg. Shut up and leave me alone."

Xue Xian seemed embarrassed at his own words, for he kept his voice very low, to the point that only Xuanmin heard him. Otherwise, Jiang Shining would certainly have taken a jab at him.

Caught off guard by the comment about brooding eggs, Xuanmin let his attention on the river surface slip. During his brief moment of distraction, another dark object passed beneath the boat…or more precisely, the boat passed over that dark object.

Lu Nianqi had been leaning over the side of his boat and caught a glimpse of it, but the object moved swiftly; he hadn't gotten a clear look. At first glance, it still looked like hair, but he saw neither a pale face nor a rigid body. Lu Nianqi rubbed at the goosebumps on his arms, relaxing a little.

Before long, the bow of the boat bumped against a stretch of muddy stone with a clank and came to a stop.

"We've arrived," Lu Nianqi said. As soon as the boat stopped swaying, he scrambled onto the bank. Pointing at a dark shape in the near distance, he said, "Do you see that? That's Old Man Liu's boat. He's the one who brought Lu Shijiu here!"

Fentou Island was engulfed in a tangle of overgrown forest, blanketed in snow and cloaked in mist. As they all observed the landscape,

their eyes fell upon a dense thicket of trunks and branches, layered and intertwined. It was undeniably an ideal place for hauntings.

The moment Xuanmin stepped onto Fentou Island, a wind rose, as if the tangled woods were responding.

Ding, ding!

The copper coins dangling at his waist began to sway, their gentle clinking filling the air.

"What's going on?" Xue Xian poked out his head for some fresh air. "What were you saying just now? It was all muffled. I couldn't hear."

"I didn't say anything. What did you hear?" Xuanmin frowned at him. Xue Xian was sensitive by nature. If something was wrong, he'd be first to feel it.

"When you stepped ashore," Xue Xian said, confused. "I was busy brooding over my marble when I heard you mumbling something strange. It sounded like a sutra but I couldn't understand it. Are you sure you didn't say anything? What I heard definitely sounded like your voice." He paused, then stiffly added, "Just a little far away…"

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi were silent for a moment, then slowly turned around to look behind them. Xue Xian's words sounded almost like a ghost story.

"Your county's pharmacists sure are brave," said Jiang Shining with a strained laugh.

"It's not usually like this," said Lu Nianqi. "It's a recent thing. For some reason, it's always foggy these days."

Jiang Shining forced another laugh. It wasn't like the island would be much better without the fog.

"Seriously, it's one thing for the brat to freak out about what's behind him, but why were you looking behind you, bookworm?" Xue Xian snapped. "Who's ever heard of a ghost that's scared of ghosts?"

Lu Nianqi stopped looking behind him and stared at Jiang Shining instead.

“I beg you, speak some sense,” Jiang Shining said slowly. “Ordinary people are scared of bandits and thieves, so what’s wrong with me being scared of ghosts?”

Lu Nianqi glanced at his palm, inspecting the treated wound, then turned his gaze to Jiang Shining, who seemed liable to be knocked over by a stiff breeze. He concluded that Jiang Shining was the sort of ghost that could be easily dealt with and thus was no threat at all.

“There’s that voice again. Did you hear?” Xue Xian whispered. “It was very quiet.” As he spoke, he tilted his head back, exposing his grotesque face that oozed ink from every orifice. His ink-dot eyes were dark, ominous, and unblinking.

Xuanmin’s gaze fell on Xue Xian, then immediately jerked away. Calmly and decisively, Xuanmin reached out and covered the paper doll’s face. “The only one haunting anything here is you.”

Xue Xian clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Did you think I was looking out so you could mess with my head?! I’ll rip your hand off!”

From the side, Jiang Shining noted, “To be fair, if you and the Master were to fight, you’d be at a disadvantage: One yank and your paper head would be gone.”

Of course, there’s always a fool or two who’d take the enemy’s side at critical moments, Xue Xian thought.

He refrained from shoving Xuanmin’s hand away; instead, Xue Xian remained still, his face covered, listening intently in the darkness. None of the chanting that so closely resembled Xuanmin’s voice reached his ears. He began to doubt himself. Could he really have misheard?

“Forget it. Lingering here isn’t going to help.” Xue Xian stretched his flimsy paper hands and swatted at Xuanmin, finally shoving the bothersome monk’s fingers aside. “Keep moving. It’s more important to continue searching. If I hear any strange sounds, I’ll let you know.”

As for himself, he might as well continue brooding his egg. It was far more useful than tussling with Xuanmin.

Rolling back into the pouch, Xue Xian lay on the marble, which rocked a little with each of Xuanmin's steps.

To be honest, his steps were quieter than a ghost's, smooth and steady. These tiny movements were barely perceptible to Xue Xian, and they even lulled him into drowsiness. The golden marble beneath him had warmed from its time in the pouch; it was now close to Xuanmin's body temperature. For a paper doll who had been chilled by the wind, it felt quite comfortable. This place might just be passable as a dwelling.

Xuanmin crouched, closely examining the damp, leaf-strewn ground. Lu Nianqi followed suit. Despite his youth, he had a strong independent streak from losing his father at a young age. He preferred to rely on himself instead of asking others for help. Even if he didn't know something, he'd closely study others to learn from them, which seemed to bring him some peace of mind.

"What are you looking at?" Jiang Shining asked, glancing at the kid, unable to help himself.

Keeping his head down, Lu Nianqi muttered, "I don't know." He felt like he would go blind from staring, but he'd not noticed anything unusual.

Xuanmin reached out and ghosted his hand over the fallen leaves at his feet. Considering he refused to touch even moss without a hemp barrier in between, touching those dried leaves was impossible for him.

Lu Nianqi quietly reached out to poke a fallen leaf himself, but all he got out of it was a muddy finger. He shot a mistrustful glance at Xuanmin's profile, then wiped his fingers clean on his clothes before standing up. To him, Xuanmin's actions seemed rather pretentious—flashy and ceremonious but with no real effect. He'd always been mistrustful, and he was at that rebellious age when children thought that most people were either muddleheaded fools or selfish snakes. A snake, like himself. A fool, like his father who'd passed early.

He knew he was heartless. Earlier, he'd shouted for Xuanmin to take him along, but now Lu Nianqi began to think the monk was just full of it.

Glancing at the black-awning boat on the shore, Lu Nianqi decided that—if things came down to it—he would just return to the boat and wait for the fog to clear before heading back to the island.

When he withdrew his gaze, he accidentally met Jiang Shining's eyes. Lu Nianqi was still a young child, so an inexplicable sense of guilt welled up in him, but that just made his stare more defiant.

However, Jiang Shining swiftly turned his gaze away. He was waiting for Xuanmin to speak.

Xuanmin stood up, lightly dusted off his pristine monk's robe, and pulled a piece of talisman paper from his lapels.

Not again! Lu Nianqi rolled his eyes inwardly. Was this monk going to use the same trick until the dynasties changed?

Surprisingly, Xuanmin didn't use the talisman to manipulate anything this time. Instead, he pulled out a fire starter alongside the talisman. Shielding it from the wind, he managed to light a flickering flame despite the damp chill of the snow and fog.

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi watched in confusion as he used the fire to ignite the talisman. To them, the yellow oil paper was no different from the kind used for funerals. It burned swiftly, curling into a shriveled, charred mass. With a flick of his finger, the curled mass scattered into fine ash that was swept away by the wind.

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi resembled two quails as they stood with their hands tucked in their sleeves, wide-eyed, watching the ash drift into the woods. Where the ash landed, a row of footprints formed on the muddy ground that had been unmarred moments before.

Unlike typical footprints that sank into the ground, the row of ash-outlined footprints were only shallow imprints on the surface of the mud, as if the owner's steps had barely grazed the ground.

"Those tracks don't look like they were made by someone walking," said Jiang Shining. "They seem more like they were left by someone hanging as they brushed against the ground."

Lu Nianqi said nothing. He suddenly regretted coming to the island with these people. None of them made a lick of sense.

"What do you mean, hanging as they brushed the ground?" Xue Xian asked. Still at the bottom of the pouch, he felt conflicted. On one hand, he was dying to know what Xuanmin and the others were doing, but on the other hand, he couldn't bear to leave his golden marble. During this brief conversation, the marble seemed to have grown warmer, even more so than Xuanmin's body temperature. However, the difference was so minute he couldn't be sure.

"Bald donkey," Xue Xian called, still clutching his marble. When Xuanmin didn't respond, Xue Xian continued to pester him. "Bald donkey. Hey, bald donkey!"

Xuanmin remained silent still.

Xue Xian rolled his eyes and shouted, "Xuanmin! Let's discuss something!"

"Speak," he replied.

"You love ripping your hem, right? Let's make a deal. Instead of ripping your hem, why not do it to this pouch instead? If you rip the opening lengthwise so that it's a little lower, I can poke my head out while still holding my marble."

It would be more than a miracle if Xuanmin agreed. One might even think he was possessed.

"You overestimate yourself," Xuanmin said coldly. "Your flimsy paper neck would rip if you stuck your head out for too long. I don't perform rites for paper corpses."

In other words: *In your dreams. Get lost.*

He stopped wasting his breath on Xue Xian and strode forward, following the footprints. Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi hurried after him.

After sulking for a while in the pouch, Xue Xian reluctantly straightened himself again. By nature, he was always doing as he pleased, and he'd spent his lengthy life without the words "restraint" or "acquiescence" in his vocabulary. It was hard for him to give in, but

eventually he stretched his flimsy neck out of the pouch's entrance. However, since he was still clutching the golden marble, it was a rather taxing position, leaving him on the verge of ripping himself in two.

His eyes were sharp, far beyond what a mortal could see. After a short moment of leaning out, he exclaimed, "There's something under the tree!"

Xuanmin halted. There was a strangeness to the feng shui of this island, but he couldn't pinpoint what. It seemed that someone had tampered with it, but he felt no traces of human interference. Aside from the occasional glance at the footprints, he'd placed all his attention on the layout of the woods during their trek and hadn't been observing the ground.

"Which tree?" Xuanmin asked.

"In front, to the left. The one with a crack in the trunk."

That was an ancient tree about three yards away from them that looked to have been struck by lightning: A large gash had split its trunk open. However, such trees were quite a common sight in the wild, so that in and of itself wasn't notable. Xuanmin walked over to it, searching around the roots until he finally spotted a stretch of string almost the same color as the dirt. It seemed to have been roughly snapped into two; one end still bore a knot.

"Huh?" Lu Nianqi picked up the rope. He ignored the dirt on it and examined the knot closely for a moment before frowning. "This looks like the string my family uses to carry our coins."

"Are you sure?" Jiang Shining asked in surprise. "How can you tell?"

"I was the one who made this knot. I do it differently from most." Lu Nianqi clumsily held out the knot out. "Look."

Seeing the mud on it, Xuanmin stepped aside.

Lu Nianqi held it up for them to see, then snatched it back when he remembered something. "But the money in our house was all stolen! How did the string end up here?!"

As soon as Lu Nianqi realized something was wrong, an unidentified object struck him. He was caught off guard; his legs buckled, and he fell to

his knees.

A sharp clang followed. He'd landed heavily in his surprise, with no idea what trap he'd triggered. A mechanical whirring rang in his ears, and the ground beneath everyone's feet suddenly gave way. This unexpected plummet was accompanied by the sound of stone grinding against stone, leaving everyone dazed and disoriented.

During their rapid descent, Xue Xian felt a tiny wisp of respect toward Xuanmin rise within him for the first time. Somehow, that damned bald donkey managed to maintain his balance in midair and even stuck a perfect landing, avoiding a messy tumble on the ground.

Xue Xian wasn't so lucky. The moment Xuanmin landed, the momentum dragged Xue Xian's neck—still caught on the pouch opening—sharply downward. *Shit shit shit. Damn him and his big mouth. It's really going to tear!*

Xuanmin straightened up in the dark. He had the vague impression that something had just fluttered to the ground.

"Ow…"

"Ugh, my arm is about to rip."

"What accursed place is this? I'm dizzy from the fall."

"Master? Master Xuanmin, are you there?"

Having heard Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi's tangled wails of pain, Xuanmin grunted in acknowledgment and lit a talisman. By the flickering light of the paper flame, he looked down and met the gaze of a paper head that had fallen to the ground.

It was only the head, and nothing more.

Chapter 12:
Island Tomb

"MASTER, WHAT'S WRONG?" asked Jiang Shining.

Being a ghost, he possessed a natural advantage over Lu Nianqi. Other than some dizziness and a headache, he hadn't suffered any real injuries from the fall and thus recovered first. When he straightened from his ugly sprawl on the ground, he saw Xuanmin holding a flame and staring at the ground. He was motionless and looked like he'd been stunned.

During their limited time together, Xuanmin had always remained calm and unruffled, as if neither fear nor anger could touch him. It was the first time Jiang Shining had seen him stupefied. Something that could leave even Xuanmin speechless… What kind of horrific situation could that be?! Jiang Shining's heart thumped hard and apprehension welled up inside him.

At Xuanmin's lack of reaction, Jiang Shining's anxiety only grew. He shot to his feet to take a closer look, but he only managed one step before tripping.

"Ah! Look where you're going!" Lu Nianqi cried out in pain as he jerked his foot back.

"Sorry, sorry, I wasn't paying attention." As Jiang Shining apologized repeatedly, he turned to see Lu Nianqi huddled with his hands over his head, messy and unkempt, his movements stilted.

"Um, I stepped on your foot, so why're you holding your head?" Jiang Shining asked.

Lu Nianqi kept quiet for a while before saying in a muffled voice, "I didn't brace myself properly and landed face-first. My forehead's all scraped."

Jiang Shining sighed. His doctor's instinct, momentarily interrupted by the fall, reared its head once more. "Can you stand? Did you hurt anything else?"

“I hit my injured hand. It’s probably bleeding again.” Lu Nianqi shook his hand, but he accepted Jiang Shining’s support to stand up. “I’m fine otherwise. Did that monk—uh, did he find anything? Why isn’t he speaking?”

As he’d lost his parents and older relatives at such a young age, Lu Nianqi’s manners were lacking. If not for Xuanmin’s small display of ability earlier, he probably wouldn’t have rescinded his words and just addressed him as “monk.”

The two injured boys hobbled over to Xuanmin. Xuanmin’s unapproachable nature made them afraid to get close, so they stayed half a step away, their necks craned forward like meerkats as they stared at the ground.

Xuanmin’s talisman must have been enchanted because, despite having burned for quite some time, the paper had not yet been consumed. A small flicker of flame remained at his fingertips. Although dim, it was enough to illuminate the face he was staring at.

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi were both shocked into silence.

A dying flame, a situation with no way out, and now their companion’s severed head was lying in front of them. They might just snap from terror! Moreover, Xue Xian’s head was face up, the paint still reminiscent of a wide-eyed corpse bleeding from every orifice. It should have added to the sheer horror. However…

A thought immediately tumbled into Jiang Shining’s mind: *What is this wise one doing* now*?*

But then his brain buzzed back to life and reality sank in. His limbs turned cold, and he understood why Xuanmin had stood there, stupefied, for such a long time.

“His head’s gone! Is he really…*dead*?” Jiang Shining asked hesitantly.

This was a truly unprecedented situation. Xue Xian had been chattering nonstop just a moment ago. Who could have imagined that he’d end up decapitating himself?

“Wh-where’s the body?” Jiang Shining continued, stammering.

Lu Nianqi hadn’t recovered yet. He swiveled his wide-eyed stare toward Xuanmin.

Xuanmin didn’t speak, nor did his expression flicker. He simply reached into his pouch and pulled out the doll’s headless paper body. The once-lively doll was motionless in his palm, much like an ordinary sheet of flimsy paper, silent and lifeless.

Jiang Shining opened his mouth but didn’t know what to say.

Lu Nianqi ended up speaking first. “I-is he human or a ghost? Can he still survive like this?”

“He should…” Jiang Shining muttered automatically, but he found himself unable to finish. After hesitating for a moment, he picked up the flimsy paper head from the ground and tentatively called out, “Xue…Xue-xiong[5]? Are you awake? If you are, please respond.”

Silence.

He held his breath for a moment but still heard no reply. His hand holding Xue Xian’s head trembled, and he quickly placed the head in Xuanmin’s palm.

“Can we glue him back together?” Lu Nianqi asked stiffly.

Like that will work? Have you ever seen anyone reattach their head with glue? Why don’t you try it and show me?

Jiang Shining was about to blurt all of that out, but he recalled Lu Nianqi’s age and swallowed his words, turning his troubled, distressed gaze back to Xue Xian’s decapitated body and head.

Only for Xuanmin, who’d been staring at his palm, to finally speak. “He’s beyond saving. Let’s burn him.”

“What?!” Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi exclaimed together.

Xuanmin’s expression didn’t so much as flicker, remaining cold and stern. Seeing that, Jiang Shining became convinced he was serious, and his legs buckled slightly. “Master, you can’t mean that?”

“I don’t perform rites for paper dolls,” said Xuanmin, and his other hand brought the still-burning talisman closer to Xue Xian’s paper body.

Just as the flame was about to brush the paper, a faint voice chimed next to Xuanmin’s ear. “Stop right there. You dare?!”

The voice didn’t come from the paper doll. Rather, it emanated from the empty void next to Xuanmin’s ear.

The fretting Jiang Shining jerked his head up. Staring at Xuanmin, Jiang Shining circled him several times, too afraid to speak a word—because he couldn’t see Xue Xian anywhere.

In truth, at the moment the paper body tore in two, Xue Xian’s soul had fought his way out of the doll, unwilling to go through that kind of pain again. His soul had no form. Like wind or air, it was wholly invisible, which suited him just fine. Of all the things he could have done, he’d ripped off his own head. The humiliation was too great! He didn’t want to see anyone just then, so he’d gathered himself behind Xuanmin and turned into a trailing shadow.

Xue Xian thought that if he floated over and whispered ominously in Xuanmin’s ear, he could startle the monk and rattle his composure.

Against expectations, Xuanmin didn’t even turn his head. His tone was unsurprised as he asked, “Not playing dead anymore?”

Xue Xian couldn’t believe it. As the saying went, everything had its match. Ever since he’d met Xuanmin, Xue Xian felt like he was perpetually on the verge of hacking up all the hypothetical blood in his hypothetical body.

“How did you know I was playing dead?” Displeased that he’d failed, Xue Xian forced the words out through gritted teeth.

Xuanmin didn’t bat an eyelid as he flipped his palm over and put away the doll he’d been ready to burn. “Scourges last for a thousand years, while the good die young.”

Xue Xian longed to send Xuanmin on a nice trip to the underworld. However, remembering his situation, Xue Xian tamped down his temper

and softened his attitude. “Fine. Someone like me shouldn’t lower myself to your level. Say whatever you like.”

At these words, Xuanmin cocked his head a little and glanced at the emptiness by his ear. It seemed he found Xue Xian’s new docility rather strange.

Xue Xian cleared his throat. His next words would be rather embarrassing, so he paused to muster his courage. He glanced at Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi, who had turned to look in the direction he was speaking from, and decided to lower his voice even further.

Spirits had no physical form, much like the wind, so Xue Xian’s size and shape didn’t matter. Shrinking himself down, he drifted around Xuanmin’s ear and spoke in a barely audible whisper.

“Bald donkey, I have a proposal.”

Xuanmin didn’t speak, but he also didn’t move, clearly waiting for what he had to say next.

“I want to borrow your body for a bit,” Xue Xian said.

Xuanmin remained utterly silent.

Xue Xian thought about it and decided his statement came off wrong, so he quickly rephrased it. “I don’t mean I want to take over your body. I mean, I need a place to stay, preferably right up against your hip.”

Xuanmin still said nothing.

Ugh, why is talking this hard?! Xue Xian thought.

The reason for his struggle was because spirits couldn’t float around aimlessly for too long. He needed to find a physical object to anchor himself to, or he would dissipate. The longer his soul drifted like this, the more it’d damage his vitality. He’d worked hard to nurse his body back to health and had no wish to return to being a quadriplegic, but now that the paper doll had ripped into two, he couldn’t possess it.

As for why he wanted to stay close to Xuanmin’s hip…

Ever since the marble had ended up in Xuanmin’s pouch, Xue Xian had grown increasingly aware of Xuanmin’s unique constitution. The

dragon couldn't help but think about the bell tolls he'd heard coming from Xuanmin's hip and how they'd left him dizzy and disoriented.

Without a doubt, those sounds were connected to the golden marble's transformation. He even began to entertain some flights of fancy—if both he and the marble stayed close to Xuanmin's hip, might he be able to return to his dragon form? Although his dragon form had been stripped of its bones and tendons, with proper nurturing, it might be possible to grow new ones.

He wanted to return to his original form as soon as he could, to regrow his bones again. Once that was the case, he would no longer need to haggle and compromise with others the way he was doing now.

"Forget it. I just need to find something to stay in. Doesn't have to be your hip—your pouch will do." Xuanmin hadn't even said a word, yet Xue Xian was making concessions without any prompting.

Xuanmin glanced at the emptiness. "After all your wailing earlier, you're now asking to go into the pouch?"

Xue Xian gritted his teeth and grunted reluctantly. "Yeah, yeah. Just say yes or no."

"Why?"

"Your bones are special."

Xuanmin shook his head, apparently unable to find a response. After some thought, he reached into the pouch and took out Xue Xian's golden marble. He twirled his index finger, and a cut opened itself in his skin, from which a bright red drop of blood oozed. Using the drop of blood as ink, he raised his hand and sketched out a spell on the marble. Xue Xian recognized the spell's design—he'd drawn the same on the paper doll back when he'd first anchored himself to it. As Xuanmin finished the final stroke, the marble glowed faintly before dimming once more.

Xuanmin reached out to grab at the air where Xue Xian was drifting and tapped the golden marble.

Just like that, Xue Xian was pulled inside. He hadn't truly returned to his body; he'd only been anchored to the marble the way he would be to

any other ordinary object. It was a temporary dwelling. Even so, he was elated. He had to admit that when Xuanmin wasn't trying to drive him crazy, he was quite tolerable. This single action was the one that mattered to Xue Xian the most, blotting out all else.

"Going to crawl around still?" Xuanmin asked while putting the golden marble back into his pouch.

My venerable self is round and smooth as glass, with nary a limb in sight. How the hell am I supposed to crawl?! Xue Xian thought.

However, he'd just accepted a favor from Xuanmin, so having a go at him right away wouldn't be a good look. Instead, he gave a proper answer. "No more crawling."

"What about blowing everything up with your antics?"

An angry retort bubbled in Xue Xian's throat, but he ultimately forced it back down. "I won't cause more trouble."

Seeing that he'd truly become compliant this time, Xuanmin pushed the marble into the bottom of the pouch.

With this, Xue Xian really settled down somewhat. After all, he'd promised Xuanmin to behave. He couldn't just go back on his word right away—he had to at least pretend to comply! Plus, Xuanmin really had chosen the best object to subdue him. In the form of a round marble, he couldn't jump even if he wanted to. The most he could do was roll around in the pouch with Xuanmin's movements.

Jiang Shining hadn't heard Xue Xian bargain, but he'd observed Xuanmin's actions and understood the general situation. He pointed at the pouch. "Is he injured?"

Jiang Shining relaxed when Xuanmin shook his head.

Now that he'd dealt with Xue Xian's unfortunate marble form, Xuanmin finally had time to observe their surroundings. Using a pinch of fire held between his fingers, he partially illuminated the area, revealing an underground stone chamber of unknown origins with a gently sloping floor. Xuanmin turned the paper flame to light up the lower area of the chamber.

Two massive shadows were sitting there. Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi both shuddered in terror.

“What are those?!” Jiang Shining gasped, retreating two steps.

“Tomb guardians,” said Xuanmin.

The sloping ground was about thirty yards in length. At the end was a half-open stone door, with a massive beast carved from stone standing on either side. Each was over ten feet tall, with fierce eyes and stout faces that exuded intimidation. Their glares were directed downward, silently scrutinizing the intruders from above. Fearsome stone beasts of such scale were usually only seen in royal mausoleums.

“Tomb guardians?!” Jiang Shining had no reason to doubt Xuanmin. A chill ran down his spine, and he rubbed his arms. “Could this Fentou Island really be a giant graveyard, as its name suggests?”

Lu Nianqi turned pale. “But I’ve never heard anyone say that. It’s only called Fentou Island because it resembles a burial mound. If it really were one, the pharmacists wouldn’t dare come here.”

Xuanmin raised the flame to highlight the faces and feet of the tomb guardians. “They’re new.”

“How new?” asked Jiang Shining.

“Erected within the last three to five years.”

If they’d been carved three to five years ago, the construction of the tomb must have also happened then. But that was bizarre. Whom had it been built for?

Xuanmin swept the light over the area they’d fallen into, then shone it into the fathomless tunnel above. He shook his head. There was no chance of leaving the way they came. Their only choice was to continue forward in search of another exit.

After another sweep of the light, Xuanmin began to walk.

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi were both shivering with fear, but they dared not stray too far from Xuanmin. After hesitating for a moment, they hurriedly caught up, closely following him from behind.

“Don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid, I’m a ghost too,” Jiang Shining mumbled to himself. He felt a bit better.

Xuanmin passed between the two gigantic tomb guardians and pushed open the half-closed stone door.

Even the oldest, most neglected wooden door would only creak softly when opened, but a stone door was different. As it was pushed open, the hefty stone base ground against the stone floor, causing it to rumble. That sound echoed in the vast and silent tomb, bouncing back and forth until Lu Nianqi’s and Jiang Shining’s hackles were bristling in fear.

Lu Nianqi clamped his legs together, feeling like he might wet himself. However, his mulish personality wouldn’t let him show weakness. He squared his shoulders and took two brave steps forward. In an eerie place like this one, he couldn’t know if it was safer to walk in the front or stay in the back.

Right as Xuanmin was about to push the stone door all the way open, it knocked into something with a muffled thud. It seemed to be stuck.

“There’s something behind the door!” Lu Nianqi cried in surprise. Despite his best attempts to quash it, there was a tremor in his voice.

Xuanmin did not hurry to investigate what was behind the door. Instead, he used the fire to scan the general area ahead.

Lu Nianqi couldn’t help screaming at what he saw. “What the hell?!”

The flames revealed another connecting hall similar to the chamber they’d been in, just a little narrower. What had frightened Lu Nianqi were the walls on either side of the hall covered in paintings of beasts even more terrifying than the tomb guardians. The murals were painted in neither black nor full color, but in *crimson*.

“W-w-were they painted with blood?!” Lu Nianqi shrieked. Ultimately, he was the youngest and most prone to panic. The murals were enormous. Just how much blood would they have taken to create?

The timid Jiang Shining also shuddered, but he quickly came to his senses. “No, I don’t think so. Take a sniff. If they’d been painted with blood, the entire chamber would stink.”

“That’s true. It doesn’t smell like blood.” Lu Nianqi calmed down as he inhaled. After that, other details became apparent. For example, the way the murals’ ink shone a bright red. Blood dried on the walls would have turned brown by now.

Xuanmin regarded the two walls. “Cinnabar.”

Painting a tomb with blood and animal parts could be easily explained, but the choice of cinnabar was a strange one because the pigment was known for its protective qualities against evil spirits. By painting the murals with cinnabar, the builder hadn’t aimed to bring peace to the interred or assist them in passing on. Instead, they had trapped them in eternal unrest, never to reincarnate.

It was an act of terrible malice.

Jiang Shining had never set foot in a mausoleum like this, nor was he familiar with local customs. However, he was knowledgeable about cinnabar. Back in the clinic, he’d grown up surrounded by medicine and medical practices. Even without going out of his way to study medicinal ingredients, he’d committed many of the effects to memory. And he enjoyed browsing through related texts during his spare time, which naturally touched on cinnabar.

“Using cinnabar to paint beasts…” Jiang Shining muttered. “How much did they hate the interred to do this to them?”

But Xuanmin only waved a hand. “Perhaps the evil spirits inside were up to no good.” If whoever was buried here refused to rest, then the builder might have had no choice but to use cinnabar to secure some peace.

Rash remarks were always unwise, so Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi ceased speculating. They noticed that Xuanmin had shifted his attention from the murals to behind the stone door, and they rushed to follow him.

The moment he saw what was there, Lu Nianqi’s face paled.

There was indeed something behind the stone door preventing it from fully opening, but it wasn’t an object. It was people.

Two people: one old, the other young.

The elderly man lay curled on the ground, one hand clutching his shoulder. His clothes were muddy and torn in several places, while dark bruises mottled the back of his hand. He might have hit it while falling. Meanwhile, the young man was slumped against the wall, his eyes squeezed shut and his lips pallid. He looked frail, perhaps even more so than Jiang Shining: dreadfully thin, cheekbones gaunt and jutting. In one hand he clutched a bundle of tangled twigs, fastened together using red string.

If Xue Xian had peered out of the pouch, he would have recognized the twigs fastened with string, as well as the slumped youth. It was none other Lu Shijiu, the person they were searching for.

“Shijiu?!” Lu Nianqi was momentarily stunned, then threw himself in front of his brother. Not knowing if he should touch Lu Shijiu, Lu Nianqi hesitated. He examined his brother closely. When he determined that there were no serious injuries visible, he could hold back no longer and began to shake Lu Shijiu’s shoulder.

“Shijiu? Lu Shijiu?! Wake up!” Lu Nianqi shouted. When Lu Shijiu still remained unresponsive, he switched to shoving the old man on the ground. “Old Man Liu, Old Man Liu, wake up!”

Jiang Shining stepped forward. “Let me take a look.”

However, as he bent down to check, the wan Lu Shijiu was roused by all the shaking and struggled to open his eyes.

Curled on the ground beside him, Old Man Liu also showed signs of awakening. Perhaps he'd dreamed of falling, for his feet jerked and his eyes snapped wide open. He stared blankly for a moment through cloudy eyes before slowly pushing himself up. Jiang Shining bent to lend him a hand, helping him to sit upright.

Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu stared at each other for a while, then looked at the newcomers, their eyes bewildered. Perhaps they'd been in a daze for too long and their minds had yet to catch up.

Jiang Shining and Xuanmin studied Lu Shijiu's actions. It was indeed uncanny; watching his movements, they'd never have guessed that he was blind.

Lu Nianqi suddenly slapped Lu Shijiu's shoulder. "Have you gone stupid? Can't you see my qi? You can't even recognize me now?"

His forceful slap seemed to jolt Lu Shijiu back to his senses. "Nianqi?" he muttered hoarsely.

Lu Shijiu stared at his brother for a long time, his eyes unmoving. No matter how one looked at his eyes, they appeared untouched by illness. When fixed on Lu Nianqi, the depths of his irises seemed to shine. There was no difference between his gaze and that of a person who could see. Maybe his eyes were just a little darker, but that was all.

However, Jiang Shining began to notice that Lu Shijiu *did* exhibit some habits common among the blind. He was slow to recognize his brother: His pupils flickered as he looked Lu Nianqi up and down, over and over. Then he reached out and pressed his fingertips to his brother's forehead and felt around.

Lu Nianqi sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth. "Don't touch me there! I hit my forehead. You won't be able to find the mole."

At those words, Xuanmin studied Lu Nianqi's face. Like he had said, the smattering of moles between his brows had been rubbed raw and scabbed over, changing the texture of the area significantly.

So Lu Shijiu grabbed Lu Nianqi's hand and brought it toward his face, ready to read his palm. Lu Nianqi tugged his hand back and frowned. "Don't touch my hand either. I cut it open on the boat here. Just when it was a bit better, I reopened the wound when I fell. Keep pressing on it like that and I'll be injured forever."

Lu Shijiu silently withdrew his hand and nodded, as if he'd confirmed that the youth before him really was his brother. "Lu Nianqi," he said, sounding out each syllable. There was no question in his tone this time.

Back in the courtyard, Lu Nianqi had shed tears in his panic. However, now that he'd finally found Lu Shijiu, he reverted to his peevish attitude, acting like he hadn't come to find Lu Shijiu of his own volition. The sight left Jiang Shining speechless.

He soon discovered that Lu Shijiu was no better. Once Lu Nianqi helped him to his feet, the first thing he did was shove Lu Nianqi's hand off his arm, as though disdaining his assistance. There was no warmth in his actions—in fact, they were entirely callous.

What was wrong with them?

Jiang Shining stared at the two brothers in frustration. He understood what Xue Xian had meant when he'd said they weren't close.

Still, Jiang Shining wasn't oblivious. He could recognize sincerity when he saw it. The anxiety Lu Nianqi had shown back at their residence, the fleeting look of relief that'd flashed over Lu Shijiu's face when he recognized his brother—neither of those were faked. So why, after Lu Shijiu got up, did they have to put on this show of uncaring coldness?

Once he was on his feet, Lu Shijiu asked Old Man Liu how he was doing, then busied himself with his bundle of twigs, ignoring everyone else. Xuanmin scrutinized him, then Old Man Liu, and his brows furrowed a little.

"Master, weren't you and Xue-xiong looking for this young man, Shijiu?" Jiang Shining felt compelled to remind Xuanmin. He'd seen Xuanmin's furrowed brow, even if he didn't know what it meant.

Xuanmin nodded, then pulled the golden marble from his pouch.

Xue Xian's head was spinning from all his rolling around in the pouch. When he'd been a paper doll, he could sense the subtle changes in the marble due to Xuanmin's influence. Now that he was *inside* the marble, he realized that the changes were actually anything but subtle!

At first, he felt as if he'd been submerged in a hot spring, the waters beneath him bubbling with steam, leaving him warm and comfortable. However, over time, the temperature seemed to rise higher and higher, to the point of scalding him.

This isn't a hot spring, Xue Xian realized with a jolt. *I'm being boiled into a damn dragon-meat stew!*

Alas, it was too late for regrets; there was no escape. The soup seemed almost viscous. As he continued to soak, his imagined limbs went limp, and he could barely lift them anymore.

With all this going on, he had barely paid attention to what was happening outside the pouch. Naturally, he was ignorant about what Xuanmin and the others were doing or whom they'd encountered, which left him little room to butt in.

Just as he was about to dissolve into broth, Xuanmin's hand dove in to save him.

Xuanmin was rather unusual. While his fingers felt no warmer than an ordinary person's—perhaps even slightly cooler—the region around his hip underneath the pouch had somehow managed to roast the golden marble to toasty perfection.

Gripped in Xuanmin's hand, Xue Xian breathed a sigh of release. No more heat at last. His spirit cooled down as well, and the fog in his mind cleared.

He rolled in Xuanmin's palm for a while to speed up the cooling process, then came to a stop and looked around him, his gaze filtered through the marble's golden surface.

"Lu Shijiu?" Xue Xian said doubtfully. "You found him so easily?"

“Mm,” Xuanmin said.

With his mind still the consistency of molten soup, Xue Xian’s reactions were sluggish. It took a moment before he replied, “Oh, that’s wonderful. Perfect, you’re even carrying your sticks, so you can find someone for me.” He slowly rolled himself over, then spoke to Xuanmin. “Pay him, bald donkey.”

Xuanmin didn’t reply to that audacious comment, but eventually he pulled out several silver pieces.

“I’ll pay you back in gold later,” Xue Xian promised.

Lu Shijiu darted his eyes from Xuanmin and Xue Xian to his brother, then nodded. “Take the offer. Don’t fleece him.”

He looked seventeen or eighteen, not yet mature, but he had his share of eccentricities. Since he needed to support his family, charging for his divination services was a must, but he didn’t set a fixed price. His customers could pay in gold, silver, or copper—whichever they chose. Choosing copper meant the price was three copper coins. If using silver, it was three silver pieces. If you stupidly wished to offer gold, the price was still three pieces.

Xue Xian belonged in the “stupid” category. Every time he patronized the boy’s services, he’d offered him three golden beads.

Lu Nianqi took the three silver pieces without fuss and tried to slip them into Lu Shijiu’s pocket. Lu Shijiu stopped him, saying, “My robe’s ripped. You keep it for now. Don’t be greedy.”

“Who’s greedy?!” Lu Nianqi said with a scowl.

Lu Shijiu ignored him to look toward Xuanmin. “What should I be divining?”

Xuanmin handed him the golden marble.

“This marble,” Xue Xian said. “It has passed through several hands. I wish to know where those people are.”

Lu Shijiu didn’t take the marble. Instead, he crouched down with his bundled twigs clutched in one hand. Staring at the marble intently, he

slowly moved the twigs over the ground.

After watching this for a while, Jiang Shining noticed Lu Shijiu wasn't drawing on the ground with the twigs—the twigs were moving by themselves. Lu Shijiu's fingers only lightly encircled them. Jiang Shining watched the sticks while crisscrossing lines and scattered circles emerged on the ground.

At last, the twigs fell to the ground with a thump. Lu Shijiu frowned before picking them up. He traced the marks on the ground with his fingers, his eyes half closed and lips moving soundlessly, as if he were calculating something.

When he was done, he raised his eyes to the marble in Xuanmin's hand. "Strange. I pinpointed the whereabouts of four people, but I couldn't find the last one at all. It's like they don't exist."

"That means there were five in total?" Xue Xian said to himself. "Well, good enough. Tell me about the four you found."

"Mm." Lu Shijiu nodded. "One is a fisherman. The second I couldn't find. The third was a sorcerer, and the fourth was a man from the county office who you should have met before, named Liu. The fifth is this master here."

Oh, just great! I knew about those four even without the divination, Xue Xian thought. Aloud, he asked, "Where are they now?"

Lu Shijiu traced the marks on the ground as he slowly replied. "The fisherman is currently in Anqing Prefecture, just one river away. The sorcerer is cultivating in a small cave on Mount Panlong, in the Shu region. As for the county scribe named Liu…" He ran his fingers over the ground, and his brows knitted, then relaxed. "Scribe Liu was caught in a fire last night. He won't survive past today. As for the Master, I don't think I need to tell you."

His explanation done, Lu Shijiu withdrew his hand and looked at Xue Xian.

Jiang Shining was shocked. "Scribe Liu won't survive past today?" He'd heard Old Lady Liu talk about how debts must be repaid, but he

hadn’t expected it to really happen, let alone so quickly!

Lu Shijiu traced the ground again at his words. “Mm, right, he won’t live past today. He’s currently bedridden in one of the side wings of his home.”

The Jiang family had perished in a fire, their bodies reduced to ash. They must have endured the agonizing torment of burning alive. Liu Chong had languished every day in that side building, suffocated by a heavy shroud of yin energy. To siphon off many years’ worth of fortune, his father had nearly cost Liu Chong his life in the process. Scribe Liu’s time had run out. He would perish from his burns, his eyes falling shut within the side building where he lay. Truly, all debts must be repaid.

“Anything else you wish to know?” Lu Shijiu asked Xue Xian.

Xue Xian shook his head, causing the marble to roll a little. “I know everything I need to know.”

Lu Shijiu then looked at the others. “What about you?”

Hearing this, Xuanmin picked Xue Xian up and placed him back into the pouch. As the marble slipped from Xuanmin’s cool fingers, Xue Xian thought, *If only I had arms to reach out with, I could hold on for just a little longer…*

Unfortunately, the marble was smooth and round and rolled right to the bottom of the pouch, and thus the dragon-meat stew started boiling away again.

Having dealt with the golden marble, Xuanmin pulled out a folded sheet of paper from his lapels. It was the same brushstroke-packed sheet he’d unfolded in Guiyun Hall. There were characters and even rough sketches. Some had been jotted down hastily, while others were written in neat rows.

He handed it to Lu Shijiu without unfolding it, but the corner of the folded sheet was exposed, revealing the characters written there: *Find them.*

“I wish to know who gave me this piece of paper, please,” Xuanmin said in a low voice.

Lu Nianqi took another three silver pieces from him in accordance with his rules. Lu Shijiu looked at the paper while touching the twigs to the ground, letting them write.

Though Xue Xian was tucked back in the pouch, he was curious about Xuanmin. As his mind had yet to broil away, he perked up his ears, listening to the voices outside.

After a moment, just as Xue Xian's mind was starting to melt again, he heard Lu Shijiu's voice drift in. "You did."

Xue Xian didn't know what to say. He had the fortune teller divine the paper he'd left for himself? There was *definitely* something wrong with him.

Wait! That reminded Xue Xian of what Jiang Shining had mentioned earlier: The scent that clung to Xuanmin was reminiscent of medicine used to treat dissociation.

Could this bald donkey really be an amnesiac?! If so, he's too fucking good at acting normal!

Just like Xue Xian, both Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi could not help staring at Xuanmin. But Jiang Shining felt that he was being rude, so he hurriedly turned away, trying to wipe all thoughts from his mind.

Xuanmin didn't return their stares, seeming oblivious to them. His expression as composed as ever, he asked Lu Shijiu, "Are you sure no one else has touched it?"

Lu Shijiu ran his hands over the ground again to check, then nodded. "No one else."

"Thank you very much." Xuanmin returned the gesture.

Now that the divinations were over, Lu Nianqi spoke up. "You've been away from home for half a month, all because you fell into this accursed place, huh?"

But Lu Shijiu didn't seem to hear. He pointed to the door behind himself. "We can't leave the way we came. We have to go through here."

Lu Nianqi glared at him, frustrated, then walked off to the side.

Lu Shijiu disregarded his brother and pressed forward, down the hallway toward the door that led deeper into the tomb. Old Man Liu followed him, and the two walked a few steps before looking back at Xuanmin and the others.

"We've explored a lot of the route here and almost got to the end last time," Lu Shijiu explained. "This time, we should be able to leave." After saying so, he cocked his head, signaling for them to follow.

Xuanmin observed them for a moment before starting after them. As he walked, he nodded at Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi. "Stay behind me."

The two of them obeyed, trailing behind him like a little tail, nervous yet also reluctant to get too close, lest they step on his snow-white monk's robe.

Lu Nianqi's face was full of indignation still, so Jiang Shining tried to console him. "Your brother must be exhausted. He's probably tried to find a way out many times. Look at his robe—it's wet and starting to dry. It must have been soaked and still heavy. He's conserving the strength he needs to walk. That's why he's speaking as little as possible."

Looking down at the wet marks on the ground, Lu Nianqi snorted in response, but he forced down his frustrated expression.

Lu Shijiu stopped in front of another stone door and placed his hand upon it. He stared at it, then blinked once. "It might be a little dangerous. Remember to follow me."

At the same time Lu Shijiu blinked, Lu Nianqi couldn't help doing the same. Shaking his head, he rubbed hard at his eyes as if to wipe something away.

Xuanmin caught this out of the corner of his eye. "What's wrong?"

"My vision got blurry all of a sudden," said Lu Nianqi. He blinked hard and mumbled, "It's better now. It doesn't matter. We need to get out of here first."

Xuanmin observed the scabs on Lu Nianqi's forehead and then looked at Lu Shijiu.

Jiang Shining followed Xuanmin's gaze and glanced back and forth between the two. The scholar suddenly felt like something was wrong.

Just when he was about to pinpoint the reason, Lu Shijiu shoved open the stone door. The hollow rumble of the door grinding open echoed through the hall, and the talisman paper in Xuanmin's hand flared before blinking out without warning.

With their surroundings plunged into darkness, everyone halted. Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi gasped, and their breath caught in their throats, where it stayed—they were too afraid to exhale.

A cold wind surged through the open stone door, carrying with it a strange, indescribable stench that was damp and full of decay, chilling enough for goose bumps to erupt over their skin. Even Xue Xian, still boiling away, felt it somewhat.

For him, the chilly wind was a welcome relief for his overheated mind. However, it was only a temporary one, a superficial stopgap that didn't address the underlying symptoms. As soon as the wind passed, he began bubbling once more. Such intense heat would render an ordinary person's mind incapable of functioning, and Xue Xian was no exception.

Rocking back and forth within the pouch, he simmered in a dreamlike state as he wondered how to free himself, even if only to catch a breath. At that moment, he had little care for his own dignity, and he groused to himself that Xuanmin hadn't reached in and let Xue Xian cool himself against his fingers.

With his mind this useless, Xue Xian's mouth moved as he complained internally, leading him to mutter all of his subconscious thoughts, though they came out slurred thanks to his daze. Rather like the repetitive mumblings of a senile old woman, he echoed the same phrases without variation.

Once the cold wind passed and the flame went out, Jiang Shining and the others held their breaths. The room was deathly silent as they stood as straight and rigid as wooden planks.

That was when Xue Xian's incessant mumblings drifted through the air, accompanied by the chilling wind. The effect was quite potent.

“Wh-what is that sound?” Lu Nianqi asked. “Wh-where is it coming from?”

“Master, can you light another flame?” came Jiang Shining’s anxious voice.

The sudden darkness had enshrouded everyone’s figures; it was as if all their companions had been swallowed, leaving each one of them alone. It was said that when silence reached an extreme at night, one’s senses would grow disoriented. Faraway noises would seem to be in your ear, making it difficult to discern distance and direction.

When Xuanmin first heard the mumbling, his hand paused on the paper. After a moment, he realized that the dazed murmur was coming from the pouch at his waist. What was that evil spirit up to *now*?

Xuanmin frowned as he listened, only to realize that Xue Xian was muttering a single phrase over and over again like a hornet’s incessant buzz: “Bald donkey.”

What’s this about? Xuanmin wondered.

At a loss, he chose to ignore Xue Xian and pulled out a new sheet of talisman paper, lighting it once more. But the moment the flame flickered to life, another gust blew past, and the light vanished.

“Don’t waste your time. It won’t stay on.” Lu Shijiu’s voice was dull as he gathered his strength to shove hard against the stone door.

In contrast to the all-consuming blackness swallowing them, the chamber behind the door glowed with a faint, ethereal light. This light was soft and feeble, like a fine dusting of frost sprinkled over charcoal wood, barely illuminating the silhouettes of those present.

Lu Shijiu, at the head of the party, said no more. He simply walked inside. Xuanmin patted the tireless murmurer at his waist, then told Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi without looking back, “Stay close.”

He, too, stepped through the tomb door.

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi, afraid of being left behind, dashed after them.

As Lu Nianqi walked, he felt something beneath his foot like a small pebble. He stumbled slightly while a loud roar echoed from the stone door grinding shut behind them. The rumbling shook him right to the core, and he almost turned tail and ran right then and there.

Despite some dim lighting, the chamber remained dark and dismal. The size of the place was impossible to gauge, nor could they discern what lay at their feet, the surroundings enveloping them, or whether anything loomed overhead.

“Wait, are those holes up there?” Jiang Shining interjected, pointing up.

The stone chamber was soundless, and his words echoed multiple times, causing him to freeze in place. His hand remained pointed at the ceiling as he quailed, too terrified to move.

“Keep your voice down,” Lu Shijiu said quietly.

With his whispering, the echoes faded, and the chamber felt less empty and eerie.

Xuanmin looked up to see seven tiny holes drilled into the ceiling. He reached out into the void above them.

“They’re not holes,” he said. If they had been, the wind wouldn’t have blown in that direction. “Night pearls,” he declared. He studied the luminescent pearls for a while, then added, “Exactly seven of them. Their positions match the Ursa Major constellation.”

At these words, understanding dawned on Jiang Shining and the others as well. They could now see that the pearls formed the shape of the Big Dipper. Their cool light shining down on them was far paler than the warm glow of the sun.

“It’s still so dark even with seven night pearls hanging there. Just how high is the ceiling here?” Jiang Shining muttered.

“You can tell by listening to the echoes,” Lu Shijiu said from in front of him. “The path ahead is difficult to traverse, so be careful not to step on the wrong stones, and make sure not to fall.”

Lu Nianqi, who had his foot in the air, immediately jerked it backward. “Wait. What do you mean by ‘the wrong stones’? And ‘don’t fall’?”

“Especially you,” added Lu Shijiu. “You must not look down.”

Lu Nianqi was stunned by this rather unreasonable request. They could barely see the outlines of their fingers here. How were they supposed to walk without looking at their feet? How was he supposed to take any steps?

However, while they talked, they slowly began to adapt to the darkness, and the outlines of their surroundings gradually became visible.

They were standing on a stone platform that resembled a cliff; wide enough to fit two rows of people, but narrow enough that if Lu Shijiu and Xuanmin took another step forward, they would be sent plummeting off the edge.

“I’m a ghost. I can’t die a second time,” Jiang Shining whispered to himself over and over. With that, he mustered enough courage to take a half step forward. He stayed a shoulder’s width behind Xuanmin, squinting ahead to make out what he could.

Before them, the stone platform led to a massive hollow in the ground. Shimmering ripples of light glinted off its surface. That must be water. However, they could see neither how deep the water was, nor where it’d come from. If they fell in, they might very well never resurface.

Strangest were the round objects that resembled heavy melons bobbing in the water, each one well-separated from the others. Jiang Shining could only discern their general shape, but he couldn’t tell if they were stones or something else. A sweep of his gaze told him there were at least a hundred of them, and they seemed to be placed in an array.

Within the dark waters in front of Lu Shijiu’s feet were stone platforms, tall and thin—each only allowing space for a single foot. They stood scattered like the uneven pillars for a lion dance, stretching out before them.

This was the only path they could take. Jiang Shining glanced around but couldn't see any hint of the other side.

Just long is this path?! He felt his legs weaken, and he instinctively turned to look at Xuanmin.

Xuanmin was surveying the surroundings, his brow furrowed. It was unclear what he was thinking. In the darkness, Jiang Shining couldn't see much of his expression beyond the slight knit of his brow.

Lu Shijiu spoke up again. "I don't need my eyes. I can see the qi here, which is much more reliable than sight. Stay close. We must move quickly."

With that, he stepped onto the first stone platform.

Old Man Liu followed closely behind. Years of rowing had left him with a slight hunch, and his stooped silhouette radiated an aura of wizened old age. He was utterly composed and hadn't said a word. In fact, he wasn't even short of breath. Seeing this, Jiang Shining felt like maybe he, too, had nothing to fear.

Xuanmin waited for a moment. Once Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu had taken their third step, he slowly raised his foot to take his first.

Reluctantly, Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi followed him. Simply observing what lay ahead had been daunting enough; actually standing on the stone platforms brought a whole new level of fear. Jiang Shining couldn't resist looking down and was immediately struck by terror. The stone platform was tall and narrow, making it all too easy to plunge into the dark, unfathomable waters lurking below. The surface of the water lay about ten yards beneath their feet. Just one fleeting glance made Jiang Shining's head spin, and a buzzing dizziness overtook him.

The stone platforms they stood on had to be carefully chosen. Which ones were safe and which ones were to be avoided were determined entirely by Lu Shijiu as he guided them along.

Doubt lingered in Jiang Shining's mind. Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu were nearly twenty yards ahead of Xuanmin. Could Xuanmin really see which stones they were stepping on?

After he hopped in this manner for seven or eight steps, an even more horrifying discovery struck him.

“Why do I feel like the water is rising?” Jiang Shining’s voice was feeble, like a man on death’s door.

“Water?!” In front of him, Lu Nianqi froze, his body turning rigid at his words. “There’s water beneath us?”

“Don’t look down!” Lu Shijiu’s voice rang out from ahead, urgency lacing his words.

Oh no…!

Only then did Jiang Shining recall Lu Shijiu’s warning from earlier, but it was too late. He watched helplessly as Lu Nianqi suddenly hunkered down and clutched at the stone platform, unwilling to take another step. “I-I can’t go on! I want to turn back. I want to go home!”

He shuffled around, ready to retreat. The stone platform behind him was occupied by Jiang Shining. In his moment of panic, Lu Nianqi leaped to the platform next to where Jiang Shining stood.

“Don’t!” Jiang Shining cried.

He moved to yank Lu Nianqi back, but he was too slow and almost sent himself tumbling off the edge. Crushed rubble rolled by his feet and tumbled into the inky waters below.

Plop! Tiny splashes blossomed like flowers in the water.

Nestled in Xuanmin’s pouch, Xue Xian felt something within himself pulse, as if a heart had sprouted inside his chest, even though he was a wispy spirit lacking any form and possessed no organs whatsoever. He mumbled something in his haze, then descended into a mental state even more chaotic than before.

The sound of rocks hitting the water startled Lu Nianqi. Something came over him while he shuddered, his voice tinged with panic. “I—”

Before he could finish, the once calm and boundless black waters beneath him roared to life, as if a long-dead creature had emerged from the

depths. Towering waves surged upward, crashing mercilessly over everyone. They were instantly drenched with a great splash.

At that moment, a sound: *Thump!*

Another heartbeat. It was as if Xue Xian had developed arteries and veins. He felt blood surge through his body and a fiery warmth crawl up his spine. Soon, even this sensation was overwhelmed by a flood of limitless heat.

"Hurry!" Lu Shijiu's voice pierced through the cacophony of roaring waves.

Jiang Shining was clinging to the edge of his platform, but before he could respond, he was struck on the back of his neck, transforming him into a piece of soaked paper.

He watched helplessly as Xuanmin seized him and then grabbed the panicking Lu Nianqi so he could carry them forward with long strides.

The water surged ever higher, and the dark waves showed no sign of abating. Xuanmin wove between the towering swells, never stopping for a moment, his steps brisk and steady.

"It's not enough!" Lu Shijiu shouted from up ahead. "We need to move faster! The water is rising too quickly, much faster than last time. I don't know if we can reach the end! Hurry!"

Before he could finish speaking, another massive wave crashed down. Lu Nianqi swallowed several mouthfuls of water, his body completely drenched. The stench of damp decay clung to his nose. The waves persisted, crashing relentlessly. In no time at all, the water line crept up to his feet, then to his calves.

Just as he was wiping the water from his face, another wave swept over him. It was as though he would never be dry again, trapped in an inescapable deluge and fated to drown within it. The sensation was hauntingly familiar, bringing with it a rush of disorientation, sending him back seven or eight years to that moment in the river…

Xuanmin glowered at the youth struggling in his hands. The rolling waves seemed to have triggered some traumatic memories in Lu Nianqi; he

was screaming like a man gone mad and dragging them down. Xuanmin raised his hand, poised to strike the back of Lu Nianqi's neck.

Bang!

The dazed Xue Xian jerked awake again. He felt a mysterious sensation spreading through his soul, as if he had drawn up something familiar from the depths, then absorbed it. It flowed through his nonexistent blood vessels, swelling and growing hot.

What the hell, Xue Xian grumbled to himself: *What is this? Rising dough?* It was like he was about to burst out of the marble.

Bang! Bang!

The sounds echoed in succession, and this time, it wasn't just Xue Xian who noticed. The group rushing toward the opposite bank also heard it.

"What's happening?" Even Lu Shijiu, who'd taken this path before, seemed astonished. "Something is striking the stone platform!"

Xuanmin paused briefly before quickening his pace even more. "Hurry."

Lu Shijiu was correct: *Something* had awakened in the depths of the inky water and was slamming against the base of the stone platform. With each impact, the platform shuddered and grew increasingly unstable. The tremors were so violent the group could barely keep their footing.

Wham!

An even louder crash echoed, and the stone platforms groaned in unison, followed by the sound of cracking stone. Not just the platform beneath them, either—for some reason, every single platform in front of and behind them crumbled at that very moment. They didn't even have the time to struggle before falling into the water.

As the water flooded over his head, Xuanmin just barely heard something from the pouch at his waist. A sizzling noise, like a spoonful of water splashing onto hot iron.

This murky lake was filled with no ordinary water. It stung his eyes, making opening them unbearable. He tried anyway, and after he blinked a couple of times, his vision recovered just in time for him to see a smooth object rolling from the pouch at his waist. Upon hitting the water, it plummeted straight down as if it weighed a thousand pounds.

Losing his hands and feet hadn't made this evil spirit any less of a pain. Xuanmin reached out to grab the marble at once.

However, just as his palm wrapped around it, an enormous weight bore down upon Xuanmin's hand, like he wasn't holding a marble, but Mount Tai itself. Before he could react, the marble sent him plunging toward the depths.

The water was astonishingly deep and cold. In seconds, the chill pierced his skin and filled his bones.

The freezing water also jolted Xue Xian's mind, clearing it, though he had yet to figure out what was going on. In his confusion, he had the audacity to ask Xuanmin, "Bald donkey, why am I in the water?"

Hell if I know, Xuanmin thought.

"And why are *you* here as well?"

Xuanmin didn't say a word. Even hell wouldn't know the answer to that question.

Ignorant inside the golden marble, Xue Xian had nothing to fear and was free to speak as he pleased, but the moment Xuanmin opened his mouth, he'd swallow water. Choking was the least of his worries; his main issue was that he had no idea where this water came from or how long it'd just been sitting here. He didn't need a brain to know it wouldn't be too clean. He'd rather drown than drink it.

The marble plunged down at full speed, dragging them along, until it crashed into the bottom of the pool. Despite the thick layer of mud to cushion the impact, Xuanmin's fingers still spasmed and curled from the pain. Anyone else would probably have found their fingers shattered.

In his daze, Xue Xian could sense that something was insulating him, and he tried to speak. But the burning heat of his expanding body consumed

his senses, and the constant tremors left him dizzy and nauseous. He flailed aimlessly in the mud, driven by some instinct, urgently searching for something. However, his thrashing only disturbed the dirt, turning the entire depths murky. Never mind finding anything—it'd be a miracle if he didn't end up lost himself.

"I'm sick of all this mud!" Xue Xian spat in his daze. His naturally irritable disposition had worsened, turning his tone thick with hostility.

Where is it, where is it, where is it…

He didn't even know what he was searching for, yet that phrase looped endlessly within his mind.

Bang!

With every thunderous impact, Xue Xian grew more frustrated. The muck churned into a frenzy and the water grew increasingly turbid.

Xuanmin lost track of the golden marble after pulling his hand back. The sheer depths of this pool, combined with their endless descent—no ordinary person could endure it, and even Xuanmin was no exception.

Lu Nianqi was the first to succumb to the water. He'd escaped Xuanmin's strike but not the suffocating sensation of drowning. After thrashing around madly in Xuanmin's grasp and swallowing several mouthfuls of water, he gradually fell silent.

Next was Jiang Shining, who'd reverted to paper form. As he was a ghost, he didn't need to breathe, but the relentless tremors and the stirring of the water were threatening to turn his body into pulp.

Finally, there was Xuanmin, who was frowning.

Just as the world began to fade with his consciousness, an earsplitting noise pierced through the muddy depths from not far away. The sound sliced like a blade in the dark, turbid waters and echoed throughout the tomb.

For a brief moment, the dazed Xuanmin was dragged back to clarity. That distant roar was familiar. He was certain he'd heard it somewhere before.

However, just as that thought flashed through his mind, the murky waters began to swirl with a terrible speed. Like a hole had been drilled into the bottom of the pool, a massive maelstrom formed, and the water surged with tremendous force toward that point.

The vortex swept away everything floating within the inky depths, including Xuanmin. The force of its suction was akin to being shackled with a thousand tons of weight. No one could resist it.

So, being soaked to pulp was the good ending. The bad ending was getting torn to pieces, Jiang Shining thought in despair as he was dragged into the swirling current.

Those in human bodies, like Lu Nianqi and Xuanmin, also experienced the strain. Each of their joints was nearly pushed to its limit. If the whirlpool intensified further, their bones would crack and dislocate.

An uncanny, clear roar accompanied the massive waves of the whirlpool. The sheer might and fury behind it would strike awe into anyone's heart. Jiang Shining thought it almost felt as if they were not in a sealed, pitch-dark tomb, but rather out in the vast and boundless seas, witnessing…

A waterspout!

Jiang Shining couldn't actually see anything as his world churned around him, and the vortex's scale was confined to the pool, yet that word flashed through his mind regardless. A waterspout, the legendary phenomenon caused by dragons drawing in the waters of the sea. He'd never seen one in reality, only glimpsed it a few times in the pages of his books, but he couldn't help but think of it.

Before those nonsensical thoughts could go anywhere, he was sucked into the depths of the whirlpool.

Crack!

One crisp sound later, Jiang Shining's vision went dark, and he lost consciousness.

The echo of thundering waves lingered for a long time, resonating throughout the vast tomb and droning on and on. Finally, after a long while,

they receded, and the tomb fell back into a deathly silence.

On the stone ceiling, the seven luminous pearls of the Big Dipper still emitted their feeble glow, faintly radiating over the area above the former pool. The once-unfathomable black waters had been completely drained, leaving nothing in their wake. In mere moments, the depths had been sucked dry, and the narrow stone platforms that connected both sides had shattered into haphazard piles of rubble strewn at the bottom of the hollow. The layer of mud at the bottom was now heaped in the corners, as if someone had impatiently swept it aside.

With the soft mud removed, the stone tiles lining the bottom were revealed. One section of the tiles had been shattered, exposing black soil. Nestled within that soil was a shining golden marble, quivering gently. Strewn around the marble were several unconscious people, their complexions ashen: Xuanmin and the others.

A moment later, the golden marble gurgled, then spat out a mouthful of water, breaking the deathly silence within the tomb. An eerie sigh swiftly followed right after.

“Haaah.” Xue Xian curled up inside the marble and released a long breath. He felt like he was about to explode. While he’d been thrashing around at the pool bottom, his consciousness had been one big muddle. He’d only vaguely sensed that he’d shattered some stone tiles and smashed something within the black soil, then pulled it into the marble. In that moment, he experienced an immense sense of satisfaction, as if he’d had finally taken a bite of something he’d long yearned for. That burning desire, too, was temporarily suppressed.

However, there was one unfortunate thing—while the golden marble had been absorbing the object in the soil, he’d really overdone it and sucked up all the water in the pool as well. Now he was bloated to the point of discomfort.

This was a real nuisance. The water hadn’t entered his stomach; it’d been absorbed by the marble. So, shouldn’t the marble have shattered? Why was *he* full to the point of bursting instead? It made no sense!

As he rolled back and forth in frustration, Xuanmin—lying unconscious at the bottom of the pool—twitched his fingers, then suddenly opened his eyes.

For some reason, his eyes looked cautious and oddly uncertain when he opened them, as if he had forgotten where he was, who was with him, and what he was doing. He stared at the Big Dipper in the ceiling above him, then abruptly sat up.

Xue Xian heard his movements and struggled to roll out of the black soil, clattering along the bottom of the pool before coming to a stop next to Xuanmin. “Excuse me, bald donkey. Have you any talismans to help with digestion? I’ll accept elixirs too.”

He looked up at Xuanmin, waiting for his reply. However, Xuanmin only stared at him for a moment. “Where did this evil spirit come from? Why are you hiding inside a marble?”

What kind of nonsense is this? Xue Xian wondered. He stopped rolling and turned stiff as a stone egg as he stared at Xuanmin in disbelief. “Are you joking?”

At the shock from Xuanmin’s words, the bloated feeling vanished, like Xue Xian had successfully digested all the water in an instant. He paused in surprise, then circled around Xuanmin twice, scrutinizing him. Had he drowned and ended up possessed by a ghost?

After a beat, he stopped to study Xuanmin’s profile, his gaze fixed on the man’s neck. The light in the tomb was dim, and while that might have hindered an ordinary person, Xue Xian could see many details clearly.

“What’s that thing on your neck?” he asked.

At some unknown time, it seemed like Xuanmin had developed a strange mark on the side of his neck that resembled a bird’s eye view of a spider. Xue Xian recalled that Xuanmin did have a small mole on his neck, but it had looked nothing like this.

Xuanmin frowned at the question and touched the side of his neck. When his fingers brushed over that spot, the spider seemed to dissolve

beneath the warmth of his fingers, retracting its legs and transforming back into a simple mole.

Xue Xian realized that the so-called spider was the result of thin blood vessels extending from the mole, which resembled the delicate legs of an arachnid.

As the blood vessels vanished, Xuanmin frowned and closed his eyes, pinching the space between his brows like he was dizzy. He remained in that position, motionless. Xue Xian was reminded of the events at Guiyun Hall. At that time, Xuanmin had also suffered from a spate of dizziness when he went to meditate in his chair. For a long time, he'd sat there without moving.

Xue Xian rolled around Xuanmin a couple more times, but found nothing unusual beyond that small mole. "Just what kind of illness is this?" Xue Xian had never seen anything like it before.

After a long while, Xuanmin stirred again. He shifted his fingers to his temples and rubbed them before scowling as he forced his eyes open.

Xue Xian was staring up at Xuanmin, observing his every move, so when Xuanmin opened his eyes, he caught Xue Xian's gaze.

"The amount of trouble you can cause without arms and legs," Xuanmin said, expressionless. "You truly deserve to be exorcised, evil spirit."

This bald donkey should just return to being confused!

Xuanmin began to stretch the hand that'd been hanging at his side. He cracked each knuckle one by one, glancing at Xue Xian dispassionately before moving to the next. Only then did Xue Xian understand what the fleshy cushion he'd landed on earlier was.

He forced himself to ignore Xuanmin's earlier words. Rolling over, the dragon was ready to ask about the spider mole, when he caught sight of a nearby shadow. It was a figure lying sideways—a human-sized stone statue, its head round like a melon's, though the face was crude and ferocious. That in itself was nothing unusual. Stone statues were common

sights in tombs. However, the statue had split open upon crashing to the ground, revealing its contents. And if Xue Xian's eyes were working…

Inside the statue was a person. A person who'd been dead for a very long time.

Xuanmin had noticed it as well. He turned his head and scanned the area, only to see that there were hundreds of similar stone statues, all lying at the bottom of the hollow.

Abruptly, Xue Xian realized how long these bodies had been soaking in the water, and that all of that liquid was within his marble now. A tremor ran through him.

Xuanmin rubbed his hands and rose, intending to take a closer look at the stone statues, when he heard the sound of splashing at his feet.

Confused, he looked down and saw the motionless marble gushing water, as if it were…throwing up.

The round object wordlessly spewed out a puddle of clear water, which slowly pooled around Xuanmin's feet. He stared at the marble. When he spoke, his tone betrayed a complicated emotion within.

"Are you going to throw up all the water?"

Xue Xian ignored him and continued to spout like a listless spring.

Xuanmin curled his lips, though his voice was now indifferent. "Will you then bathe in all the water you spat up?"

Xue Xian said nothing, but the marble stopped what it was doing.

"You really know how to disgust someone…" he muttered after a second.

"You're too kind. I'm flattered." Xuanmin turned his gaze away and stepped toward a few nearby statues.

After some hesitation, Xue Xian rolled after him, hot on his heels. "Pick me up already! I'm so bloated my head is spinning."

Xuanmin glanced at the marble that was glistening with water. "After the corpse water on you dries."

Xue Xian froze before yelling, “If you keep saying such disgusting things, I’ll throw up right on you! Don’t test me!”

“All right, I won’t.” Xuanmin paused in exasperation, but he still picked the marble up. Then he tossed him right into the pouch, refusing to touch him for a second longer.

“How dare you act disgusted by me?” came Xue Xian’s muffled voice from inside the pouch. “You were soaking in the water too! You’re drenched!”

Xuanmin stopped for a moment, then sliced open his fingertip without a word. He squeezed several droplets of blood from the wound and used them to draw a simple rune on his palm. Instantly, all the water on him evaporated. His thin hemp robe dried and once again became light as a feather, and even the water on Xue Xian vanished without a trace.

His goal achieved, Xue Xian was quite satisfied. What brought him even greater satisfaction was that the curious nature of Xuanmin’s hip seemed effective for digestion as well.

Xue Xian could feel the object he’d absorbed from the soil slowly merging with the marble and becoming one. During his earlier daze, he hadn’t even seen what object he was absorbing. Now, he could feel it as it melded into him. The buried thing must have been a part of his body. Perhaps it was a piece of his spine, his blood, or a slice of tendon. It wasn’t much, and it wasn’t complete. Nevertheless, as it slowly joined with the marble, a powerful satisfaction surged through him, and some feeling and warmth returned to the area that should have been his spine, which had been hollow for over half a year.

When it came to nurturing spirit, qi, bones, or flesh, there had to be a starting point, akin to how a seed is needed to plant flowers or trees.

Xue Xian had spent the better part of the past six months refining his qi into a cohesive form. After much effort, he’d finally succeeded in establishing a connection within his spine, enabling his upper body to move as it once had. But qi was so different from bone, lacking shape and substance, and he hadn’t managed more. This time, however, he could feel the seed taking root within him.

Outside of the marble, Xuanmin was inspecting the stone statues. There were too many strewn across the stone tiles for him to inspect each one, so he focused only on those that were damaged. They did not all look the same. After examining around ten, he identified three distinct types: those with glaring eyes of fury, those sporting drooping brows as if weeping, and those wearing wide grins of joy.

These three types of statues also contained different types of corpses. The ones within the angry statues had no heads, the ones in the sad statues had no legs, and the ones in the happy statues had no hands.

“Did you figure something out?” Xue Xian asked. “What purpose do these stone statues serve? They look rather sinister.”

“I understand a little,” Xuanmin said with a frown.

Xue Xian was puzzled. “You seem to know about everything. How and why?”

“Perhaps I read it in a book once.”

There were over a hundred stone statues. They clearly weren’t ordinary funerary gifts designed to accompany the dead. Given their careful design, there had to be a purpose to them. Xuanmin recalled a concept like this, although he was unsure of its source. Still, he knew there was a feng shui array capable of reversing one’s fate called “Flow of a Hundred Soldiers.” If executed properly, it could protect someone from all manners of calamities and guarantee a hundred years of prosperity.

It was an exceedingly powerful array, but it had one flaw—it was impossibly vile. Few people could bring themselves to execute it because this array required the sacrifice of three hundred lives: a hundred “fierce generals,” a hundred “suffering commonfolk,” and a hundred “wicked villains.”

The different faces of the stone statues here corresponded neatly with those three groups. The furious statues were the generals, the sorrowful statues were the commonfolk, and the laughing statues were the villains.

“Three hundred lives…” Xue Xian was taken aback by the sheer scale of the array. “That’s insane. When humans wish to do evil, they’re no

less terrifying than I am. Where did they manage to find three hundred people? That's no small number. The loss of half that would raise a commotion. Over a hundred people missing? Even a blind person would see that something was wrong."

Just as he was speaking, a clinking sound came from one of the stone statues Xuanmin was examining, and something fell out. It sounded like a piece of copper or iron. Since a corpse had been carrying it, it was covered in decay and filth. Xuanmin frowned, then pulled off a small section of his robe's hem.

Xue Xian scoffed at the tearing noise. "Keep ripping your robe like that, and soon it'll be a shirt."

Of course, he was exaggerating. Xuanmin's robes didn't brush the ground, but they were very long, enough to cover most of his feet. When he walked, they glided over the earth, close but never touching, and each piece he tore off was no bigger than his palm. Even if he did it seventeen or eighteen times more, his robe wouldn't be that much shorter. But Xue Xian could never control his tongue, and it was easy to take jabs at Xuanmin from time to time.

Picking up the fallen object with the white hemp scrap, Xuanmin held it up to the light and inspected it closely.

It was a small iron tag. One side was engraved with a beast's head, while the other carried a name. However, the latter had been scratched out with a knife, rendering it illegible.

At Xuanmin's lack of response to his insult, Xue Xian poked out of the pouch. "Huh. That looks familiar."

"You've seen it?" Xuanmin considered pushing the marble back inside, but hearing his words, he held the iron piece out instead.

"I remember now," said Xue Xian. "On the way to Wolong County, we came across many run-down temples in the mountains. We found one of these while we were resting inside. It was even stained in blood. From a battle, I assumed. Later, just before entering Wolong City, the bookworm and I found another one at the foot of the city gates."

The tags had been cast from a single mold, so they'd been crafted together, and most likely originated from the military. Soldiers danced on the edge of life and death, and anyone who'd been in battle would have spilled blood, fulfilling the requirement for "fierce generals." However, the military was strictly regulated. Could a hundred soldiers disappear without being reported?

After a half year wandering among the commonfolk, Xue Xian knew little about the military, but Xuanmin was aware of some things. Everyone in the military carried one of these iron tags, he explained. First, they were useful for administrative purposes. Second, they served to verify their owners' identities. Third, if their owner perished in battle and their body couldn't be recovered, the tag would substitute for the corpse and be interred in its place. If the soldier didn't perish on the battlefield but grew too old or suffered a serious injury, rendering them unable to fight, they'd be discharged from service. The army wouldn't reclaim their tags, but they'd scratch out the name written upon them.

"Where did you hear all this?" Xue Xian asked.

Xuanmin stiffened before shaking his head. "I forget. I might have overheard someone discussing it in the corner of an alley."

Xue Xian found Xuanmin to be quite the oddball. Judging from his spider-shaped mole, he was suffering from some kind of sickness. The way he woke up unable to recognize others implied his condition must have been quite severe. A bald donkey, probably afflicted with dissociation but constantly acting aloof and almighty, who always kept people at a distance, had somehow managed to gather this much information by mingling on the streets? That was rather hard to believe.

"Do you look like someone who just chats with strangers?" Xue Xian asked. Before Xuanmin could answer, Xue Xian continued, "No, you do not."

Xuanmin's expression remained unchanged as he pressed down on Xue Xian's round head…or maybe it was his body. Whatever. In any case, he pushed the marble back into the pouch.

Xue Xian refused to be silent as he dropped in. “So the ‘fierce generals’ were either old or wounded soldiers. What about the ‘suffering commonfolk,’ and the ‘wicked villains’?”

“Beggars and bandits.”

That answer hadn’t come from Xuanmin, but another gentle and steady voice.

Xuanmin turned to see that Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu had woken up and were walking toward them.

Old Man Liu was wizened with age, while Lu Shijiu looked even frailer than Jiang Shining. Had they really come to so quickly? Being tossed by the whirlpool’s current and slammed into the pool floor would have been enough to seriously wound anyone, but both of them showed no signs of new injuries. In fact, they looked exactly the same as when Xuanmin had first encountered them behind the stone door. Even the bruises on their bodies and the dampness of their clothing was unchanged.

Xuanmin scanned them up and down. He didn’t say much, only turned to the remaining hundred or so stone statues and asked, “How do you know?”

Lu Shijiu raised the bundle of twigs he was holding and shifted his fingers. “I saw it and divined it. I touched a couple of them earlier. These soldiers were intercepted on their way home. They’re easy to kidnap—just say they died in battle and their bodies couldn’t be found. That would be enough to erase any suspicion.”

Regarding beggars and vagrants, no one paid any attention to whether they came or went. Sourcing bandits was even simpler, as the populace was happy to be rid of them. Wherever they were sent, whether to prison or to be put to death, no one would ask any questions.

With all three factions in hand, the array had been constructed.

Lu Shijiu’s blind eyes were much more potent than the average person’s. He looked around him, then pointed at two different locations. “Something’s there.”

Xuanmin walked over and plucked a stone shard from each place where Lu Shijiu had pointed. As he brushed his fingers over their surfaces, he could feel runes engraved upon them. Xuanmin held the shards and scrutinized them for a while.

"They're familiar," Xuanmin eventually said.

"What's familiar?" asked Xue Xian.

"The runes. I've seen them elsewhere before."

But the light in the tomb was too dim. No matter how hard Xuanmin looked, he could only make out rough outlines.

While he was examining the stone shards, Lu Shijiu turned to glance at Lu Nianqi, who was unconscious nearby. To Xuanmin, Lu Shijiu said, "Nianqi is…"

Sensing the hesitation in his tone, Xuanmin finished for him without looking up. "Very afraid of water."

"He sure is. I was feeling too sluggish to sense anything earlier," came Xue Xian's lazy voice from the pouch, "but I did hear him screaming his head off."

Lu Shijiu dropped his gaze. "That was my fault."

Chapter 13:
Life Exchange Array

LU YUAN HAD BEEN a widower. Thirteen years ago, he'd moved from the Lu family's old home to settle down east of the river. His wife had passed, so he was raising his two sons alone, supporting them with his small fishing boat. Despite a naturally fearsome face, he was an honest, straightforward man. He always smiled at others, which softened the ferocity of his features.

His neighbors often said that Lu Yuan's sons didn't look at all like him. Lu Yuan was tall and stalwart, with muscular, powerful arms from his years of hauling in nets.

His two sons were a different story. When he'd first arrived east of the river, his eldest son was four and his younger son was two. They were both thin and gangly.

Still, while his younger son was skinny, you could see a hint of Lu Yuan within him: He was spirited and full of vigor. Lu Yuan was a bighearted man, and Lu Nianqi was playful and unruly. He'd often get into trouble, so Lu Yuan had to discipline the mischievous boy frequently.

It was the first son who was truly nothing like Lu Yuan. Whenever the three of them were together, the eldest son, nicknamed Lu Shijiu, always stood out. He was far too pale, bordering on sickly. His personality was also very different from Lu Yuan's. Lu Shijiu barely spoke, and he didn't act like a child at all. Most of the time, he came off as very mature, but he'd occasionally make strange movements. That, combined with his ashen skin and frail appearance, gave him an unsettling air, so people tended to avoid him. The neighbors would tease Lu Nianqi from time to time, but they rarely did the same to Lu Shijiu.

What the neighbors didn't know was that Lu Shijiu was not Lu Yuan's biological son.

Lu Yuan had very little family; his older kin had long passed. After his wife had died, he'd fallen into deep depression for a year, and his home

suffered for it. For that entire year, his son Lu Nianqi had very little to eat, and he turned gaunt and pitifully skinny. So Lu Yuan decided to lock up their old house and take his son to Wolong County. The riverside was good for fishing, which would provide them with enough to live.

Before entering the city, he and his son had rested at an old temple within the mountains. He'd encountered Lu Shijiu huddled there.

A child of around three or four hiding alone in an old temple wasn't a normal sight. Lu Yuan asked Lu Shijiu a few simple questions, which were enough for him to guess what had happened.

Lu Shijiu had once lived over a hundred miles away in Ge County, but with the drought that year and too many mouths to feed, his parents had found themselves unable to support all their children, and they were forced to abandon a few. They'd probably wanted to sell them, but Lu Shijiu was sickly and weak, and his vision had been impaired from birth. No one wanted him.

Unable to find a buyer, they could only abandon him. If they dropped him too close to home, he might find his way back, so they took him a hundred miles away instead. Travelers would rest at temples from time to time. If he were lucky, a kind person might find and adopt him.

It was a foolishly optimistic thought. After all, there were far more robbers and wolves in the mountains than kindhearted souls. The likelihood of being captured or devoured was far greater than the chance of being adopted.

But Lu Shijiu had been lucky. He'd encountered Lu Yuan.

Lu Yuan thought that raising two sons wouldn't be that different from raising one, and now Lu Nianqi could have a playmate, so he decided to bring Lu Shijiu home.

However, he soon realized that Lu Shijiu wasn't a good playmate. The boy preferred to sit quietly instead of running around.

Still, he was a sensible child. He would feel his way around despite his poor vision, help Lu Yuan sort through fish and shrimp, or bring a stool to the stove so he could prepare soup. While Lu Yuan was strict with Lu

Nianqi, he never touched a hair on Lu Shijiu's head. Instead, he doted on him dearly.

Children loved playing with those slightly older than them, and Lu Nianqi was no exception. Despite Lu Shijiu's reticence, Lu Nianqi would follow him around. Lu Nianqi saw it as helping, but Lu Shijiu only saw it as a nuisance.

For instance, one day, Lu Shijiu had boiled a tub of water to help his father wash their clothes and shoes, hoping to remove the reek of fish from them. Lu Nianqi scampered around the kitchen, excited to help, only to slip and land in the boiling water, bottom-first. He shrieked like a stuck pig.

On another occasion, the tree in the yard had become infested with insect shells, hampering its ability to produce fruit. Lu Shijiu took a wooden broom to sweep the shells away, and Lu Nianqi scampered over to help again, only to grow amused by the shells during their cleaning. He picked one up and blew on it like a whistle, and the clear, bright sound delighted him. Alas, by nightfall, his lips had swollen into sausages, causing him to wail again.

At first, just the sight of Lu Nianqi gave Lu Shijiu a headache, but as his eyesight deteriorated, he could no longer see Lu Nianqi anyway, so he grew used to his little brother.

Once Lu Shijiu's vision faded nearly to nothing, he began to notice strange things and hear odd sounds. Sometimes, he couldn't resist following the sounds outside, searching for their source. When he found nothing, he quietly returned to his tasks.

The year things changed, he was nine, and Lu Nianqi was seven. One day at noon, Lu Shijiu heard another strange noise and, unable to help himself, slipped out of the kitchen, feeling his way to the riverbank. Lu Nianqi had matured a little by then due to his older brother's blindness. Occasionally, it occurred to him to look after Lu Shijiu.

The moment Lu Nianqi saw Lu Shijiu leave, he hurried after him, pestering him to come home the entire way. However, it was like Lu Shijiu had been bewitched; he didn't seem to hear his younger brother at all.

That same afternoon, Lu Shijiu glimpsed a dragon's shadow within the river's misty depths. After yelling in astonishment, he slipped and fell right into the water.

Lu Nianqi instinctively leaped after him, wanting to pull his blind brother ashore. But, as had so often happened, Lu Nianqi soon discovered that his helping only caused more trouble, and he almost paid for it with his own life.

The stretch of river they'd fallen into was secluded, with no fishing boats around. If it hadn't been for a couple selling vegetables passing by, they might have drowned without anyone the wiser. The old man didn't know how to swim, but he recognized Lu Nianqi.

"By the time Dad arrived, Nianqi had stopped struggling," Lu Shijiu recounted slowly. "The waters were turbulent. He couldn't rescue both of us together. So Dad first held me up so I could breathe, then he pulled Nianqi ashore. When he returned for me, the wind picked up, bringing waves with it. I felt a vortex forming beneath my feet… It latched onto his ankle, and he began thrashing and choking on water…"

He sucked in a breath, frowned, then exhaled softly. "I was shoved ashore, while the vortex dragged him underneath. He never resurfaced. Dad was gone, and Nianqi became terrified of water. He also stopped following me around."

As he spoke, he didn't cry or show any strong emotions. His tone was placid, as if he were recounting a stranger's story, and his eyes didn't so much as moisten. For some reason, the listeners grew uncomfortable in his stead, as if they were feeling sorrow in his place.

Xuanmin put away the two rune-covered shards and spoke up. "I noticed a break in Lu Nianqi's palm line corresponding to the age of six. But someone elongated it by force."

Lu Shijiu's eyes were on Lu Nianqi. He didn't look up or speak.

After a long pause, Lu Shijiu said softly, "At that time, I didn't really understand. I thought that things would be fine as long as I found a way to

connect the lines. Even if… Even if it stunted his growth, he'd be alive at least. It'd be enough for him to keep living, no matter what kind of life it would be. But…"

When Lu Shijiu had lengthened Lu Nianqi's life, Lu Yuan had met with disaster—an equivalent exchange.

Having finished his account, Lu Shijiu finally met Xuanmin's gaze. "The tomb doesn't end here. There's still another section ahead that will take you to the exit. It's not dangerous. Could you do me a favor and take Nianqi there?"

Xuanmin looked at him askance. "One final favor?"

Lu Shijiu tensed. "Mm," he murmured before sighing. "Otherwise, I've taken this trip in vain."

Xuanmin was about to respond when Xue Xian interjected from the pouch. "This hollow is at least thirty feet deep. How are we supposed to climb up and keep going?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "Should I spit the water back out so you can all float to the top? What a great idea! Saves us time and effort!"

Lu Shijiu fell into a shocked silence at Xue Xian's interruption. It was Xuanmin who had to respond.

"No need to trouble yourself. You were the one who swallowed it all. Take responsibility and live with it."

Xue Xian sputtered with fury but failed to reply.

As they spoke, the always-quiet Old Man Liu gently patted Lu Shijiu and pointed at something. The others followed his gesture and saw a shadow on the wall of the former pool, about as large as a man.

They headed toward it for a better look, eventually realizing that it was a metal door. After being submerged for so long, its lock and hinge had rusted shut. Unfortunately, Xuanmin's talisman had proven useless in this chamber, so they had to use more primitive methods.

After a great deal of time and effort, they finally managed to smash open the rusted lock with a piece of rubble.

Lu Nianqi, who'd been unconscious on the ground the entire time, was jolted awake by the screech of the iron door creaking open.

"You're up?" Lu Shijiu looked at him. "Can you stand? If so, don't keep lying there. If you want to leave, you'll need to do it on your own two feet. No one's going to carry you."

Lu Shijiu had returned to cold indifference the moment Lu Nianqi woke up, showing no desire to mend their brotherly relationship.

"I know." Lu Nianqi had swallowed several mouthfuls of the foul-tasting water. It aggravated his throat, leaving it a little hoarse. In the past, Lu Shijiu's lack of caring would have pulled an angry retort from him, but he threw no jabs this time. Instead, he stumbled to his feet and coughed while hitting his chest, expelling the last dregs of liquid from his throat.

Jiang Shining's paper body hung not far from where they stood, drying. It'd been a while, and he was no longer so damp—at least not enough to fall apart with a single touch.

Xuanmin picked him up, tossed him into the pouch with the bloated marble, and joined everyone in leaving through the iron door.

Behind the door was a staircase sloping upward. The tomb's craftsmen had probably designed it as an exit they could use after laying down the tiles at the bottom of the pool. The end of the staircase led into another passage, which was an exact match with the hall they'd entered from.

It was as Lu Shijiu had said: There were no further dangers. The lengthy staircase didn't even have any disturbing murals. It was surprisingly safe.

When they'd almost reached the top, Xuanmin's paper blazed to life once more. Right as it flared, the tongue of flame began to emanate an odd smell, which spread around them in faint wisps.

Inside the pouch, Jiang Shining cried, "Wait, don't move! Something's not right with the smell!"

“What smell?” Lu Nianqi seemed to recall something after speaking and covered his mouth, afraid that something strange might enter through it. He held his breath.

However, thanks to Jiang Shining’s warning, Xue Xian’s sharp senses —sharper than Xuanmin’s, let alone anyone else’s—caught a faint whiff of…

“Sticks and leaves!”

It was the smell of crushed leaves and wood—not especially pleasant, but not particularly disagreeable either. Still, it was strange to encounter the scent within a dark, sunless tomb.

Jiang Shining came from a family of doctors and had grown up among many herbs and poisons. Though he would have said he was inferior to his parents if asked, he still knew a fair amount. He was also sensitive to the smells of various plants and capable of discerning between them. The fact he’d cried out meant there really was something odd going on.

Emboldened by Xue Xian, Jiang Shining crawled out of the pouch to look at Lu Nianqi. “You don’t need to cover your nose and mouth.” He waved his paper hand reassuringly. “You probably won’t be familiar with this smell. To be honest, it’s not one I know well either, but I saw two people lose their lives to it, so it left a deep impression on me. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of this poison? Its folk name is ‘Seven Climb Eight Descend Nine Pass.’ The name comes from how anyone poisoned by it can only climb seven steps up a hill or eight steps down one. In any case, they’ll die by the time they’ve taken nine steps.”

“Isn’t that called ‘antiar’?” Xuanmin asked. “I’ve heard of it.”

“Oh,” said Jiang Shining. “That’s right, you’re from the south. The upas tree that produces it thrives in the south but can’t survive long here. Generally, if you wanted to use it in your medicine, you’d have to wait for summer and autumn to buy some from southern herb dealers.”

Somehow, Jiang Shining always circled back to the topic of medicine and herbs no matter what he was talking about.

“Can you get to the point before New Year’s?” Xue Xian said coldly.

Jiang Shining's words stuttered to a stop. When he continued, his voice was stiff. "Don't touch anything around us. I suspect that the walls of this passage, the ground beneath our feet, and even the ceiling above our heads have been coated with the sap of that tree. We're all wounded. A couple of brushes, another couple of steps, and we'll be goners."

The more he spoke, the quieter his voice became, his confidence waning, because Lu Shijiu had turned to look at him with his sightless, pitch-black eyes as he was speaking. Then, Old Man Liu slowly turned his head and fixed his murky eyes on him. Finally, even Xuanmin looked down at him.

"You…"

Jiang Shining mumbled a couple of words before clearing his throat and shrinking back into a corner of Xuanmin's pouch. "Don't stare at me. I'll just lie here at the bottom of this bag. You all be careful."

Xuanmin swept his gaze past Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu before fixing upon Lu Nianqi. After going through the iron door, the order they'd been walking in had changed. In the beginning, it'd been Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu in front, with Xuanmin behind them and Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi trailing him. Positioned in the center, Xuanmin had almost served as a barrier.

Things were different now. While Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu were still in front, it was Lu Nianqi who was trailing directly behind them. No longer serving as the central barrier, Xuanmin brought up the rear, guarding their backs.

Lu Nianqi lowered the hand covering his mouth and nose. Halfway through Jiang Shining's explanation, he turned his back to Xuanmin and faced Lu Shijiu, staring fixedly at his blind brother.

Lu Shijiu didn't return the look. After Jiang Shining's warning, he turned away and continued walking toward the other end of the staircase.

The flickering flame between Xuanmin's fingers cast a dim yellow glow in front of him, just wide enough to reach Lu Shijiu's feet. Before the youth stretched a vast expanse of darkness, while behind him glowed a

warm, golden light. With each step, he walked the delicate line between light and shadow.

The collar of his garment was torn, and his disheveled hair partially scattered over his pale neck, casting a large shadow. Thanks to the dim lighting, it was difficult to notice anything amiss. Furthermore, Lu Nianqi was far shorter and thinner than most. Being several steps beneath Lu Shijiu, he was unable to clearly see the area around his collar.

As Jiang Shining had warned, the entire passage was smeared with the poisonous sap of the upas tree. The closer they got to the exit, the more pronounced the smell became.

"We're here," Lu Shijiu said, standing at the top of the highest step, his back to the others. "This is the last section. It leads to the entranceway. I've never gotten to the end, but the exit should be beyond another stone door."

"I've never gotten to the end…"

This statement sounded innocuous, but something seemed amiss on further thought—if he'd gotten this far and seen the stone door, then why hadn't he left?

Old Man Liu also stood at the top of the stairs. From Xuanmin's vantage point, he could see the elderly man's half-turned profile. His old eyes focused blankly at a spot in the passage ahead, and he seemed both dazed and lost in thought.

Lu Shijiu didn't continue walking. Instead, he turned to look at his brother behind him.

"What are you staring at me for? You can only see my qi, not my face." Lu Nianqi stopped in his tracks. For some reason, his voice was hoarse and trembling, laced with an undercurrent of sorrow and fear. "Stop looking and just go. What are you standing here for? We can talk outside. I don't want to hear your rambling now."

"I can see your face," Lu Shijiu said calmly. "Even if it's not clear."

He ignored the second half of Lu Nianqi's sentence and lowered his head, then pulled that bundle of twigs from his clothes. The red string

binding it was a little faded. It was unclear how long it'd been tied there, yet it bore no signs of wear, a testament to its quality.

"This toy…you take it," Lu Shijiu said, handing the bundle to Lu Nianqi.

Lu Nianqi frowned and stepped aside a little, looking at his own feet instead of Lu Shijiu. "I don't want it. Hold it yourself!" he snapped. "Why should I have to carry your stuff? Stop talking so much. You're blocking the way. Get going! What are you standing there for?!"

The corners of Lu Shijiu's lips curved into a faint smile. "I'm not going."

In the long years the two brothers had supported each other, this was one of the few times that Lu Shijiu had ever smiled. Unfortunately, Lu Nianqi didn't see it. He kept his head down, frowning, refusing to look at Lu Shijiu, until he sighed heavily.

"What do you *mean* you're not going? Don't talk crazy…" By the time Lu Nianqi raised his gaze again, his eyes were watering. He shoved Lu Shijiu hard. "Why don't you just *go*?!"

The firelight in Xuanmin's hand perfectly lit Lu Shijiu's face, revealing the subtle transformations taking place on his ash-pale skin. Faint marks began to emerge on his forehead, scattered right between his brows, resembling new moles poised to sprout. They mirrored the ones originally on Lu Nianqi's forehead.

"But I can touch you. Why aren't you moving?" Lu Nianqi struggled to suppress the lump in his throat. He repeated the sentence twice, as if trying to convince himself. "Look, I can grab your hand. There's no difference between you and ordinary people. Didn't they say… Didn't they say you can't touch ghosts…?"

Stubbornly fixing his eyes on Lu Shijiu, Lu Nianqi suddenly realized that his sight was blurred—he couldn't see his older brother clearly anymore.

Sniffling, Lu Nianqi reached up to rub his eyes, and his hand came away wet. When he raised his head, he still couldn't see.

"Stop rubbing your eyes." Lu Shijiu sighed softy and shoved the bundle of sticks into Lu Nianqi's hands. Then, he grabbed his younger brother and slowly dragged him up the steps.

The more Lu Shijiu told Lu Nianqi not to rub his eyes, the harder the latter did, until he pulled away and stood there with his hands over them, completely refusing to move.

Off to the side, Old Man Liu hobbled a few steps forward and bent down by a wall. He returned to the steps a moment later and handed the things he was carrying to Lu Nianqi.

"This is Uncle Liu's money pouch," Lu Shijiu said. "The boat fare he collected some time back is here, along with the herb seeds he collected for Aunt Liu. It'll help with her headaches." When Lu Shijiu finished speaking for Old Man Liu, he went quiet.

There was a long silence.

"I don't have anything else to give you…" Lu Shijiu said at last. He placed his hand on Lu Nianqi's head. "I'm going to find Dad now. Don't forget to burn some papers for us during Tomb-Sweeping Day and the

Ghost Festival. Burning them will guarantee your joy and longevity, as well as plentiful descendants."

With that, he gently patted his brother thrice, then withdrew his hand.

Lu Nianqi felt coolness dispersing from the top of his head, and his heart instantly chilled. He wiped away his tears and looked up, only to find everything still blurry. As he tried to make out what he was seeing through that veil of fog, he realized that Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu had disappeared. He wiped at his eyes again before spotting a dark shadow twenty yards away.

Xuanmin went over and shone the light, revealing two figures collapsed next to the wall of the passage.

The smell of tree sap was even stronger here. The closer he drew, the more potent it was. He saw the bloodstains smeared on the wall and understood: Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu had wounds on their backs and necks that had allowed the toxic fluid to seep in when they leaned against the wall.

As Lu Shijiu had fallen, he'd drawn a circle surrounded by complex runes in his own blood on the ground. It was a chilling sight, and most bizarre were the numerous copper coins scattered around the array. Despite their disordered appearance, they'd actually been placed in accordance with the stars and constellations overhead.

Xuanmin guessed the sequence of events. The four strings of coins that Lu Nianqi had shouted about losing had been swiped by the deceased Lu Shijiu himself using condensed spiritual energy. After all, the objects needed for a life-exchange array were very specific.

Despite standing there beside Xuanmin, Lu Nianqi was unable to see any of this. His mind and vision were prepossessed with the sight of Lu Shijiu lying there. The ground was too cold, so he wanted to help Lu Shijiu off of it. Inadvertently, when Lu Nianqi stepped forward, he walked into the circle.

Xuanmin watched as the circle of dried brown blood turned vibrant again. The spot between Lu Nianqi's brows and the cut on his palm both

shone with a bloody glow—but before anyone could blink, the light was gone.

A wisp of mist escaped from the mouth of Lu Shijiu's icy, long-rigid body. It circled around Lu Nianqi three times, as if some kind of ritual had been completed at last, then bowed in Xuanmin's direction.

With that, this final favor was complete. If not for the Lu family, both father and son, Lu Shijiu probably would have died in that temple thirteen years ago. Now, he'd swapped his life for a life. To him, it was well worth it; his wish had been fulfilled. It was just too bad that, from now on, he'd have to burden Lu Nianqi with placing another lantern on the river during the Ghost Festival.

As he faded, he wondered if his younger brother would cry.

Chapter 14:
The Skeletons on the Riverbed

THE MIST INSIDE the passage dissipated. The moment the life swap completed, a chill enveloped everyone. Perhaps the reversal of yin and yang caused by exchanging a life for a life had stirred the three hundred souls within the tomb. A sudden wind bellowed from behind them, followed swiftly by an urgent rustling. At the same time, the sounds of stone statues crumbling and colliding swept over them.

Xuanmin clapped his hand on Lu Nianqi's shoulder. He was about to say "Let's go" when something lunged toward them. It brought with it a gust of air carrying the indescribably foul and stifling stench of decay.

The corpses might have struggled to walk while alive, but after being trapped in the tomb for so many years, they were suddenly as swift as the wind. Before anyone could move, a dense mass of people burst onto the stairs. A handful of them might have been manageable, but there were dozens—no, *hundreds* of yin corpses surging like the tide. There was little anyone could do to stop them, even if they had eight hands.

The passage became unbearably claustrophobic. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

Xuanmin grabbed the string of copper coins at his waist, but then grimaced, reluctance in his expression. Was he unwilling to use them, or would it be inconvenient, somehow? Maybe he *couldn't* use them?

As more and more corpses gathered, they packed the passage like stinking salted fish, surrounding everyone within. The besiegement slowly compacted as the corpses crouched and braced themselves.

Then, in a relentless black wave, they lunged again toward Xuanmin.

"Bald donkey?!" The rocking of Xuanmin's pouch was making Xue Xian's head spin. He could sense the stench of rot fanning around them, though mixed within decay's metallic smell was a faint, medicinal aroma.

At that second, something in Xuanmin's hip quivered before radiating intense heat—one far more searing than the heat that had boiled Xue Xian earlier.

Perhaps it was the temperature, or maybe it was something else, but Xue Xian's heart thumped once and dropped.

The smell of blood grew stronger.

This was bad, bad, bad. How were they supposed to make it out alive?

Of course, Xue Xian was only a golden marble and couldn't die. Besides, he was a dragon, and their lifespans were practically endless. He'd eventually find a way to safety. The question was actually complete nonsense when applied to him and the long-dead Jiang Shining.

There were only two people here who needed to stay alive: Lu Nianqi and Xuanmin. The first was none of his business, while the other…

Well, they happened to have gone through a series of events together. That was *all*. Xue Xian didn't understand why he felt so anxious.

His anxiety persisted anyway, so after racking his brain, he had Jiang Shining give the marble a shove, which gave Xue Xian the momentum needed to leap out of the pouch.

The residual warmth from Xuanmin's hip still suffused Xue Xian, leaving him with a nameless sensation. It might be that the thing he'd absorbed had finally been digested.

The golden marble fell to the ground with a clatter, and Xue Xian looked up.

Half of Xuanmin's snow-white robe was stained with blood. The flames between his fingers swayed violently, like a beast struggling to free itself from its chains. The yin corpses teemed around him in a solid formation as they attacked with either gnashing teeth or clawing fingers. Which, Xue Xian couldn't say.

Through it all, Xuanmin's expression remained as cold and indifferent as ever, as if it wasn't just others that he didn't care about, but himself as well.

Xue Xian didn’t know if Xuanmin had heard him land, but the flame within the monk’s fingers did twitch a little. The golden marble rolled away, speeding madly like a headless chicken, but it also seemed to be planning something.

After darting through the tangle of the corpses’ legs, Xue Xian’s marble slammed hard into the stone wall of the passage.

Boom!

The entire tomb trembled as if struck by a gargantuan weight.

Wait, was that me?! Xue Xian was dumbfounded.

While it wasn’t impossible for the marble to have that much power, Xue Xian had been weaving all over the ground. By the time he crashed into the wall, he hadn’t much momentum left. He’d originally planned to strike it several times, shaking it loose little by little. If he used his full strength, he could blow ten of these tombs to smithereens.

But if it wasn’t his doing, whose was it?

Xue Xian didn’t dwell on it and crashed into the wall twice more.

Boom!

The stone tomb shook again. Debris rained down from the ceiling, cloaking Xue Xian in dust. He didn’t have a mouth at the moment, but he sputtered a few times anyway before he rolled back and turned to Xuanmin. Other than him, the only one capable of doing this to the tomb was that bald donkey.

Sure enough, through the mass of razor-sharp claws, Xue Xian saw Xuanmin using his bloodied finger to trace around the edge of his coins, soaking them with blood. Perhaps it was Xue Xian’s imagination due to the dim lighting, but Xuanmin’s five coins, usually so dull, seemed to shine with a faint, oily sheen, as if they’d been polished by the blood.

Suddenly, Xuanmin pressed his thumb down on one of the coins, and crimson blood gushed out, bathing the copper surface once more.

Boom!

The whole hallway shook as if caught in an earthquake. The tremors sent Xue Xian spinning all over, until he was on the verge of spewing the water inside his marble.

As if he was performing a prayer of sorts, Xuanmin placed one hand on the copper coins while the other held the flame to his chest. Splatters of blood flew around him. His eyelids lowered, and his lips moved soundlessly.

A deafening explosion echoed throughout the tomb. Debris flew and dust swirled, the ground groaning as it neared collapse.

Then, icy water poured in through the cracks in the rubble, submerging them all.

The new water was freezing, but it felt nothing like the stagnant water from the cave's pool. Instead, it possessed a crisp, invigorating chill, reminiscent of the first breath of the north wind during winter.

This was genuine river water!

Xue Xian fell into the water, thinking with a strange calmness, *That bald donkey stole my plan. He really blew up the tomb…*

However, before he could finish his lament, he realized that Xuanmin's explosion had not only destroyed the tomb—it had blown apart the entirety of Fentou Island. Rubble mixed with mud and trees rained down upon them, along with a massive army of yin corpses, forming a mighty avalanche.

Xue Xian was watching this in stunned silence when he felt river water surge beneath him. It seemed the tomb's collapse and the destruction of the Flow of a Hundred Soldiers array had sent the river into turmoil, summoning another massive maelstrom. There were now countless eddies around him, all being drawn in one direction.

The group found themselves tossed about by the maelstrom along with the shattered rubble and yin corpses, and eventually they lost all sense of orientation.

In his intense dizziness, Xue Xian felt a surge of rage. Whatever had been absorbed into the golden marble really had been digested, and now it

stirred—as wrath flashed through him, the heat he'd absorbed from Xuanmin's hip rampaged through the marble, until his entire body throbbed with pain, like the liquid in a blister yearning to burst from the confines of his flesh.

In an instant, dark clouds gathered in the sky, and a blinding light slashed downward. Answering thunder rumbled like a stampede of horses, rolling from the heavens and pounding into the river below. Torrential rains followed, churning up a mist that shrouded the entire river, making it impossible to see anything within.

Moments later, a faint, clear whistle echoed from the riverbed, and a massive shadow flickered within the dense mist.

With a sweep of its body, the whirlpool pulled down toward the riverbed, dragging with it countless yin corpses and debris. The currents twisted like water dragons as they dove into the muddy depths below.

If six feet of earth were enough to bury one person, then what about sixty fathoms of river mud? Could that lay those three hundred souls to rest?

By the riverside, a child who hadn't rushed to shelter from the rain peered over the courtyard hall, a plum branch in hand. He stared blankly at the distant river and sky. As his parents came dashing over to grab him, he turned to them.

"Dragon!" he cried.

The couple turned to look without thinking and glimpsed a long shadow flickering within the haze. It rode over the clouds and thunder, then leaped into the vast river entirely. "Heavens, it really is a dragon…"

The dragon had climbed into the clouds, but the heavy mist and thunderstorm meant only a scant few had sighted it. With time, it would probably fade into legend, just like the name of Wolong County itself.

In reality, the great legend Xue Xian hadn't been as untrammeled as that family of three perceived. While he had indeed ascended with the

clouds and thunder, that was in his dragon's nature. In the exhilaration of regaining his true form, he couldn't help expressing his joy. However, once he broke through the clouds, his paraplegia reared its head again: He could only move his upper body. His lower half, instead of aiding him while turning, became a long, cumbersome burden.

Full of despair, he plummeted right back into the water.

Xue Xian had been disconnected from his true form for over half a year. During that time, it had passed through several unfamiliar hands before being buried beneath Scribe Liu's accursed residence. Who knew how much filthy mud and how many wandering ghosts it had consumed?

As Xue Xian's spirit returned to his body, it was like putting on a new skin. He'd need time to reacquaint himself with it. In a moment of excitement, he'd overextended himself, and when he fell back into the river, his explosive might from earlier dissipated. His spirit was struggling to control his body. He wanted to curl up to protect himself from the fall, but his attempts were unsuccessful. Sinking down to the river's depths, he could only resign himself to his fate.

Meanwhile, Xuanmin had begun to float upward when the whirlpool dissipated. Just as he caught his first glimpse of sunlight, that plummeting dragon collided with him. The half-conscious Xuanmin was slammed into the riverbed by Xue Xian's long tail, crushing all air from his chest. With that, he was out like a light.

Xue Xian blew a bubble from his snout. *There are always certain things we find ourselves powerless against. How about you lose your memory again?*

Fortunately, the only person he'd crushed was Xuanmin. Lu Nianqi had escaped unscathed, as well as the bodies of Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu, and they now floated to the river's surface.

The clamorous thunderstorm summoned by Xue Xian's return dissipated as swiftly as it had come. As the rainstorm ceased, someone soon discovered the bodies floating on the river and had a nasty shock.

The corpse collector responsible for this stretch of water rowed his creaking boat to the river's center. He'd spent his entire life fishing up corpses, but he'd never encountered anything like this. The sheer number of bodies floating on the misty surface of the river was absurd. Some of them had been submerged for who knew how long, their clothes tattered, while others looked like they'd just drowned.

The corpse collector counted on his fingers—nine in total.

The three fresh bodies floated close together. They were probably victims of the same drowning incident. The remaining six were somewhat scattered. Perhaps it was his imagination, but from his vantage point, one of those six bodies seemed to be looking toward an islet in the middle of the river.

Many smaller islets were scattered around Fentou Island. They mostly served as resting spots for waterfowl and were easy to overlook. However, for some reason, they seemed almost like strangers now. Something was definitely off about them.

The corpse collector tugged the corpses over with his pole while musing on what it could be. A moment later, he realized.

"What happened to Fentou Island?!"

The corpse collector was an old hand; he worked briskly. In the blink of an eye, he'd pulled two of the fresher bodies onto his boat. When he flipped the bodies over, he found himself shocked again. Old Man Liu the boatman was his acquaintance, and he'd watched Lu Shijiu grow up.

"How awful." He sighed, then reached with his pole to pull up the third body. It was the small, skinny Lu Nianqi. He couldn't help but sigh again. "Old Lu's family is no more…"

However, after pulling Lu Nianqi onto the boat, the corpse collector gasped. "Why does Xiao-Nianqi look a bit different? I saw him just a few days ago."

Lu Nianqi often went out. It was his job to gather firewood and cook, so the corpse collector saw him around regularly. Everyone in the area who was even slightly acquainted with the Lu family knew Lu Nianqi's real age. They'd heard that after he'd lost his father and almost drowned, he'd burned with a high fever for days that damaged his body. Ever since then, his growth had been stunted. At first glance, he looked like a young child, though a precocious one.

The corpse collector wasn't a tall man, and in his memory, Lu Nianqi had barely reached his chest. Looking at the boy lying on the deck now, the collector roughly measured him with his arm. He seemed *taller* than before.

"How can someone grow taller in just a few days?" the corpse collector wondered aloud, then quickly provided himself with an explanation—the boy might have been bloated from soaking in the river.

Just as the corpse collector withdrew his hand and was getting ready to fish out the bodies farther away, Lu Nianqi, who was lying lifeless on the boat, shot straight up.

"Kuh, kff, geh!"

Lu Nianqi coughed several times, then spat out a mouthful of river water, his face flushed crimson from the force of it. Blearily, he opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the startled corpse collector falling into the river with a splash.

"Uh…"

Xue Xian, lying on the riverbed, was roused by a loud splash on the water's surface. He stared blankly for a long moment before regaining sensation in his body, along with some control.

He tried to turn his head, but as he did, he spotted a large stone lock lying several feet away. The lock was enormous, half the size of a coffin. It had a square bottom that seemed particularly heavy, and a pointed top with a hole through which a thin iron chain had been threaded. The chain was pulled taut like it was attached to something above.

Looking up, Xue Xian found that the other end of the chain was tied to something resembling tattered cotton fluff with black river plants attached to it, fluttering in the water.

No, it was neither of those things!

Lu Nianqi had seen something on their way to Fentou Island: a black mass beneath the boat that resembled hair. He'd taken it for river plants

because, if it'd been hair, the corpse should have been floating on the river surface, not submerged underwater.

Xue Xian took in the stone lock and the iron chain again. Now, he understood why this person hadn't floated to the surface—they were tethered by the ankle, forcing them to stand upright in the water.

He swung his head, churning the river water, and a broken chain nearby was pulled closer by the current. Judging from the break, he'd probably snapped it during the storm he'd raised earlier.

Thinking silently, Xue Xian waited for his body to recover. Once enough agility and control had returned to his upper half, he raised his front claw and tugged on the iron chain.

And…he missed.

Exasperated, he stared down at his own claw. He'd grown used to reaching out at will in his human form and had forgotten that a dragon's claws were comparably shorter.

In any case, his first attempt had failed because the chain was out of reach.

It's a good thing my travel companions are either unconscious or missing, Xue Xian thought privately. *How humiliating would it be if they'd seen that? Especially that annoying bald donkey!*

He raised his dragon head and moved along the soft mud of the riverbed, unwittingly dragging his lower half over Xuanmin's chest as he passed by.

The unconscious Xuanmin twitched his fingers.

Xue Xian's sharp claws scraped against the iron chain. Like a knife meeting tofu, the sturdy iron chain was sliced clean in two. The lower half of the chain slowly sank into the riverbed, while the body it was tethered to began to drift toward the surface.

It's a little tiring, Xue Xian thought with a click of his tongue. He was still unused to his dragon form. Even raising his upper body to break a chain was exhausting, akin to scaling an intricate pagoda while carrying a thousand-pound weight, leaving his arms weak.

He slumped back to the riverbed, his large dragon head resting listlessly on the soft mud. Adopting the least taxing posture he could manage, he watched the stone lock bound with iron chains. After scanning the area for a while, he deigned to use his stubby front claw to flip the stone lock over.

The bottom of the lock was exposed, revealing a circular mark carved into a corner of its flat surface.

During his time mingling with humans, he'd heard that many craftsmen liked to leave a mark on their creations. They'd leave a large one if possible, making it akin to a signboard. Otherwise, they'd leave a small mark in some inconspicuous corner, as subtly as possible, making the mark invisible unless one knew where to look.

No one would be bored enough to tie up corpses for fun, so there must be some purpose behind it. His intuition told him that these standing corpses were related to that sinister design of the array within the tomb, but everything inside Fentou Island had been blasted to smithereens by Xuanmin. There probably weren't any clues left.

He tapped his claws on the muddy ground in deliberation before he decided he might as well be a busybody. With a swift sweep of his body, he summoned a current to push the stone lock toward the riverbank.

The tumultuous current surged with great force. Xue Xian rode its momentum, his body coiled around Xuanmin to bring them both to the shore. To him, the broad river spanned no more than the turn of his head or the flick of his tail. Quick as lightning, he'd reached the bank with both the lock and Xuanmin.

With a twist of his upper body, he sent a large wave pouring downward, and the stone lock and Xuanmin were pushed onto the muddy bank. Xue Xian tossed his head again. White waves engulfed him as he transformed back into human form.

Shit! No clothes!

Before anyone could see, he had instantly turned back into a dragon.

When he'd painted the paper doll, he'd made sure to include clothes. Now that he'd returned to his true body, that wasn't the case.

Awkward. He pulled his lips back from his teeth in a dragon's grimace and plopped down. With a listless sigh, he sank back to the riverbed, wishing he could just bury himself.

Moments later, a small black worm, which was really a dragon no more than a few inches long, drifted to the riverbank on the crest of a wave. It looked up at the sky and released a long but silent sigh, then slithered over to Xuanmin without a word before slipping into his sleeve and coiling around his wrist like a delicate bracelet.

The moment that cool, smooth sensation brushed his skin, Xuanmin opened his eyes.

A dragon's body was covered in scales; the ones along its back were the toughest, akin to armor. The closer the scales were to the head, the larger they were, and the reverse was true for the ones near the tail. If you plucked a scale from the dragon, its edge would rival even the sharpest of blades.

However, the scales on its belly were quite a bit softer. Earlier, at Guiyun Hall, Xue Xian had gifted Xuanmin with a scale from his belly. Xue Xian was proud by nature and believed that most people were irredeemable fools who couldn't be trusted with anything. He feared that if he left Xuanmin a scale from his back, that bald donkey might try consuming it without grinding it up first. If he did that, the scale's edges would slice his mouth right open, and he'd drop dead in the room. *That* would be quite the scene.

In any case, this tiny dragon had a much softer belly. To Xue Xian's annoyance, after shrinking himself down, all his scales had become soft and tender—even the hardest scales of his back had lost their edge. All his scales had left was a slight suppleness, and it was even more pronounced on his belly.

Xue Xian lowered his head and poked at himself with his claws. How ridiculous—his scales gave out at the slightest prod, no different from the skin of an ordinary human! They might have been even softer than that!

The worst part was that he felt no pain in his abdomen either. He was poking himself with a dragon's claw, which could cut iron like butter, but he felt no pain. Clearly, his claws had softened terribly as well.

It was a heavy blow to his dignity. With the scales on his body so soft and tender, Xue Xian felt a little vulnerable as he sat coiled around Xuanmin's wrist.

Xuanmin's hands were quite lovely to look at: slender and strong. However, as a place to curl over, Xue Xian found the one he was on quite uncomfortable. Xuanmin's wrist bone dug into his belly, and he felt as if he were lying over the rounded bowl of a ladle. It wasn't painful, but it didn't feel good either, and it was *extremely* annoying!

Xue Xian scratched at that wrist bone with a claw, but to no avail; he didn't draw even a hint of blood. Instead, it felt more like he was scratching an itch for the monk. Instantly incensed, he turned his head away and refused to move another inch.

This evil spirit had a flair for the dramatic, as well as an awful temper. His talent for driving himself into fits of pique was absurd.

However, his constant shifting around was useful for catching Xuanmin's attention.

Xuanmin blinked, his expression blank as he stared at the darkened sky with unfathomable pitch-black irises. There was a hint of emptiness within them. Then, his lips turned downward, because he'd detected a faint whiff of blood mingling with the damp air from the river water.

When he'd fallen into the water, his eyes had been closed, and he'd recited his incantations silently to avoid swallowing any water. Nonetheless, he'd been trapped on the riverbed for too long, and now his chest prickled with a dull pain.

He quietly coughed twice and propped himself up. Without thinking, he surveyed his surroundings. He was on the soft mud by a riverbank, beside a heavy stone block that had sunk a few inches into the earth. There was no one around him, so there was no immediate danger. The river's surface was shrouded in mist, and the fishing boats were gathered in a

distant spot, busy with their own business. No one was paying attention to where he was. Satisfied, he looked away.

Xuanmin couldn't stand dirt and filth. When he observed his surroundings, a faint look of disgust emerged on his face.

As he was getting up to clean off the blood and mud, he felt something on his wrist moving. Frowning, he brushed aside his sleeve and came face-to-face with the thing coiled around his wrist.

Xue Xian peered up at Xuanmin. Due to the dragon's discomfort, his entire being exuded a slothful disinterest, and he was loath to engage someone so irritating. The moment he saw Xuanmin's expression, Xue Xian couldn't help rolling his eyes.

Here we go again!

He made a noise of impatience, then stretched out his words as he spoke. "Shut up. *Don't* ask who I am, and don't ask who *you* are either. Just listen to me. Touch the left side of your neck."

Xuanmin was a mistrustful man. If someone else had spoken to him in this way, he'd tie them up first and ask questions later. However, this thing wrapped around his wrist sounded far too self-assured, like there was no way it was speaking nonsense. Moreover…based on appearances, he could crush this thing without blinking. It wouldn't be able to harm him anyway.

In the end, Xuanmin coldly stared at it for a moment before complying. He raised his hand to examine the left side of his neck.

Xue Xian shook his claws, directing him as if he were his servant. "Is your hand too short or something? Move it a little higher—yes, right there. Touch that spot. Don't talk to me before you wake up. I'm not in the mood to entertain your nonsense."

The incident with the chain and his short claws had left him frustrated, so he was taking any opportunity he could to mock Xuanmin. Truly, Xue Xian was an unreasonable evil spirit.

He watched as Xuanmin touched the spiderlike mole on the side of his neck. Just like the last time, the blood vessels surrounding the mole

gradually retracted. The process of the blood withdrawing must have been an unpleasant one; Xuanmin's brows knitted, and he closed his eyes, sitting still for a moment before reopening them. The trace of wariness in his gaze faded away, replaced by a neutral countenance, though with a hint of exasperated bafflement in his gaze. Seeing that, Xue Xian knew Xuanmin's episode was over, and that he'd remembered everything.

Dropping his head, Xue Xian returned to his flippant attitude, still coiled around Xuanmin's wrist. "Constantly forgetting everything… How did you end up like this? Isn't it annoying having to do this routine before you remember?"

Xuanmin didn't answer. He'd been disorientated earlier and hadn't quite examined his new living accessory. Doing so now, he discovered that the evil spirit had sprouted a head and a tail, and even a full set of whiskers and claws. From the shape of its head, it looked like a dragon, but he'd never seen such a *tiny* dragon. Ignoring the tender scales, its lower half appeared lifeless. The slender, swaying tail seemed unable to move, as it didn't coil around his wrist like the upper half did. Instead, it hung down limply.

Xuanmin stared at it for a moment, then reached out to pinch that dangling tail. Under his fingertips, it felt thin and pointed, with a peculiar texture.

Xue Xian shot him a sideways glare and snorted. "Unhand me! What are you doing? Did you feed your sense of propriety to the dogs? Which book taught you it was okay to grab someone's tail like that?"

It was true his lower half lacked sensation and wouldn't feel pain even if pinched. But pain and discomfort were one thing and dignity another. Here he was, a proper dragon, being made fun of by someone! It was disgraceful. If not for the fact that he had to rely on this monk for transportation, he would have tossed this clueless fool into the South Sea with a single swipe of his claw.

Of course, Xuanmin wasn't a playful person. In fact, he had no idea what "fun" was. He was just surprised that the evil spirit had so quickly undergone such a drastic transformation.

“Where did you swipe this body from?” he asked, though he didn’t sound concerned.

“What do you mean, *swipe*?” Xue Xian stared at him. “You think I would tolerate using someone else’s body?”

At this, Xuanmin felt inside his pouch, only to find the marble was gone.

“This is your true form?” he asked. His tone was flat, as if he were simply summarizing something.

Xue Xian’s snort was his answer.

“Hmm. Since you’ve gotten your body back, why are you coiled around my wrist?” Not that he intended to let Xue Xian go. After all, the paper he was carrying clearly stated *Find them*, and the notes on it were related to Xue Xian. He wouldn’t let this evil spirit leave so easily.

Well, that was what *Xuanmin* intended. That *Xue Xian* would linger made zero sense. After all, he’d tried to run away several times. He was quite the repeat offender, and a tireless troublemaker. Why hadn’t he fled while Xuanmin was unconscious? Instead, Xue Xian had docilely coiled around his wrist, waiting for him to wake up. That was completely unexpected.

Xuanmin raised his hand and poked at the dragon’s tiny head, trying to check if the evil spirit had eaten something disagreeable, or if he’d run into some kind of trouble, and that was why he was acting so out of character.

Xue Xian swatted at Xuanmin’s fingers, shoving the nuisance away. “You’re the one who wanted to capture me, but now you’re trying to chase me off? Want me completely at your beck and call? Isn’t that unreasonable? I’m not leaving, so deal with it. And stop poking me! Get lost!”

Xuanmin had nothing to say to that. Scolding him while coiled around his wrist—Xue Xian was beyond shameless.

In reality, Xue Xian didn’t have an upset stomach, nor had he lost his mind. Xuanmin’s suspicions weren’t unfounded either. Xue Xian really had considered running. Being naked was a minor issue since he could easily

find someone by the river to borrow clothes from. If that didn't work, he could strip the bald donkey while he lay unconscious. At worst, he'd look like a man in mourning. It wasn't a bad trade.

No, he'd chosen to stick to Xuanmin because of the benefits Xue Xian had sampled while inside the marble. There was something unique about Xuanmin's body, a mysterious quality that had hastened Xue Xian's return to his own form. Perhaps Xuanmin could also aid the dragon in regrowing his missing bones and tendons more quickly.

Xue Xian considered himself quite callous—he'd stay if there were benefits and leave if there were none. It was that simple. He didn't have time to sort out his more detailed reasons. In any case, he wasn't inclined to leave at the moment and planned on following this monk for a while longer. At worst, he'd just leave Xuanmin an extra gift or two when they parted ways.

Besides, having Xuanmin around made certain matters easier to investigate. He was much more useful than that bookworm Jiang Shining.

He dodged Xuanmin's hand again, raising his dragon scales and baring his claws, so the bald donkey knew not to touch him. Xuanmin's eyes, however, remained fixed on the stone lock.

To Xue Xian, the object he'd absorbed back in the river was a seed. Even when curled up quietly, he could feel it stirring within him. Somehow, though it was inside him, he couldn't figure out what it was. If it was a part of his body, why had it appeared on Wolong County's Fentou Island?

Could the person who'd stripped his tendons be the one who'd set up the feng shui array on Fentou Island? If not, there was probably still a significant connection there. If Xuanmin could illuminate the markings on the stone lock and untangle where it'd come from, Xue Xian could perhaps use the answers to track down the person who'd maimed him.

Under Xue Xian's urging, Xuanmin cleaned himself of mud and blood and walked to the rocky riverbank.

At the same time, Lu Nianqi came stumbling over, pale as a ghost. Xuanmin noticed the fishing boats and passenger vessels that had gathered

near them. They'd probably spotted Lu Nianqi and the others, but that didn't explain why quite so many people had shown up.

Lu Nianqi staggered as he felt his way over to them, then squinted in their direction for a long time before speaking.

"It really was you." His voice was heavy with exhaustion, probably due to the truth of Lu Shijiu's death. He'd yet to recover from the shock. After catching a breath, he added, "Could you…help me with something? Right now, I don't know what's wrong with my eyes, but I don't feel too well. Shijiu is right in front of me, yet I-I can't see him. I can see the outlines of others, but I can't see *him* at all."

With a flick of Xuanmin's fingers, the remaining water on his robe vanished. He released the freshly dried Jiang Shining from his pouch before striding after Lu Nianqi, heading toward the gathering of boats on the riverbank.

Xue Xian remained coiled around Xuanmin's wrist, his tail protruding like a dangling worm from Xuanmin's sleeve as it swayed back and forth. Squirming beneath the fabric, Xue Xian eventually peeked out, his dragon head only half a finger wide as he cocked his head and peered at Lu Nianqi.

Despite his frail and gangly appearance, Lu Nianqi had far more vigor than Lu Shijiu because he was often on the move. Coupled with his stubborn temperament, he exuded a sense of toughness; in essence, he was a hardheaded little rascal.

However, at present, every step he took appeared arduous. Each movement was light and tremulous, as if he couldn't stand touching the ground and applying any force to his limbs was unbearable. From the strain on his face, it was clear he was enduring immense pain. After only ten steps, he was as white as paper. The river water dappling his forehead had just dried, but now a sheen of cold sweat hung in its place.

"You said you felt unwell? What's wrong?" Xue Xian saw Li Nianqi's terrible complexion and, suspecting that it wasn't only due to grief, had to ask.

After all, his lips were pallid and bloodless, like a patient on death's door, burning with fever. As his face grew whiter, his eyes seemed darker—pitch-black and devoid of light, as if they didn't belong to a living being.

"It's nothing," Lu Nianqi said. His eyelashes fluttered, and he licked his dry, cracked lips before shaking his head. "I don't quite understand it. It's just… There's a dull ache in my bones, and when my feet touch the ground, I hurt from head to toe. I'm afraid to put too much pressure on anything."

His answer was soft and low. Before Xue Xian could reply, Lu Nianqi continued quietly, "I'll just deal with it. It'll pass. It can't be worse than being dead."

Jiang Shining cast him a sidelong glance. "That might not be the case."

Suddenly, Lu Nianqi turned to Jiang Shining.

"You're no longer alive, right?" Lu Nianqi blurted out. He might have been much older than he looked, but he was still a child. His words held nothing back.

In that moment, even Xue Xian, who couldn't see much peeking from Xuanmin's sleeve, felt that Lu Nianqi's eyes brightened, as if he'd caught hold of a lifeline.

Jiang Shining had a gentle temper. Though he would throw Xue Xian the occasional retort, he'd never treat a child that way. He paused in his surprise, then nodded. "Mm, I've been dead for three years. But I haven't fulfilled my last wish, so I'm staying in this paper doll."

At that, Lu Nianqi could barely walk straight anymore. He made a misstep, and a sharp pain seared through his foot. As he cried out, another wave of cold sweat dripped down his face. However, he completely ignored it to stare at Jiang Shining.

"Really? That means, even if he's dead, he might not have disappeared?" Lu Nianqi asked.

Jiang Shining looked at Xuanmin, then back to Lu Nianqi. "Living souls will usually linger for a while," he mumbled. "In certain situations,

they might stay longer, right, Master?"

Xuanmin glanced at them, but he didn't answer. Instead, he pointed ahead, indicating that they'd arrived. A number of boatmen and fisherman had gathered. The presence of so many people made discussing the supernatural inconvenient.

Lu Nianqi took Xuanmin's silence as agreement, and some color returned to his face.

In front of them, seven or eight boats, all tied near the shore, jostled against each other. The people on the boats disembarked, and a few worked together to drag something off a larger boat.

"Heavens, when did they fall into the water?" One of them clicked his tongue. "They're all rotten."

"I've been fishing corpses from this river for a great many years, and this is the first time I've seen anything like this."

That was the corpse collector's voice. When Lu Nianqi had come back to life on his boat, the corpse collector had stopped his retrieval to bring the three back to the riverbank. He carefully laid Lu Shijiu and Old Man Liu on the stones, then helped Lu Nianqi onto the bank and gave him a cup of hot wine to warm himself up with. After that, he rowed back out to retrieve the remaining corpses.

After hearing the corpse collector's report, all the fishermen and boatmen on the riverside came rushing over to help. As they still needed to carry their fish and passengers, placing dead bodies on their boats would be inauspicious, so they instead helped the corpse collector drag the waterlogged corpses—little better than lumps of tattered cotton—onto the shore and arranged them in a row. It made for a macabre sight.

Xuanmin frowned at the row of corpses.

"I just got a big scare." The corpse collector had reached the bank, and he moved the last body ashore while he continued, "I counted six floating corpses to begin with, all near a small islet. But when I went to retrieve the last two, another one came floating up. It surfaced right next to my boat. That feeling… It was too much!"

Xue Xian discreetly scratched Xuanmin with his claw and muttered beneath his sleeve. “Keep an eye on those corpses. The last corpse the collector talked about should be the one I sent to the surface. They’re definitely connected to that horrible array. I’ll explain it later. For now, just pay attention and see if there’s anything strange about them.”

His voice was muffled within the fabric and difficult to catch clearly, but Xuanmin managed to understand most of it, as if the dragon’s voice had reached his ears through the gaps within his robes.

Xuanmin turned his face aside, grunting in acknowledgment. Then, he flicked Xue Xian’s tail using a finger concealed within his sleeve, indicating the dragon should settle down.

Rather than do that, Xue Xian chomped on his finger.

“Let go,” said Xuanmin flatly.

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi both started. “Let go of what?”

Xuanmin’s expression was still as stone as he gazed at the waterlogged corpses that had been dragged ashore. His eyes swept over them, from the exposed bones of their ankles to their disheveled tangles of hair. Compared to the others on the shore who were covering their noses and retching, he seemed almost ethereal in his demeanor.

Perhaps that was too intimidating, for after Jiang Shining failed to extract an answer, he dared not ask again. He took it for a case of tinnitus and turned his head away.

Xue Xian’s teeth were still clamped around Xuanmin’s finger, biting fiercely at him for flicking his tail. It was a long time before his anger abated enough to let go.

In the meantime, it turned out that Xue Xian’s guess had been quite accurate. Though there was nothing particularly odd about those seven corpses, they all had something hanging from their waists. While the fishermen and boatmen were busy vomiting and catching their breaths, Xuanmin stealthily used a piece of white hemp to remove the dangling objects.

When he was done, he placed seven iron military tags in a row, all inscribed with names that had been scratched out. This proved that these people, together with the ones in the tomb, were part of the same group.

Xue Xian watched as Xuanmin wrapped the tags in white hemp again and put them away.

"By the way," Xue Xian said, "some of the iron tags buried in the riverbed are still there, just not all of them. We can take a closer look later."

Xuanmin walked up to Lu Shijiu's corpse as Xue Xian spoke. Lu Nianqi was by his brother's side, his hand raised, like he wanted to reach out for him but was too afraid to. As if the moment he did, Lu Shijiu would truly be gone forever.

"Look." Lu Nianqi raised his head, and his eyes fell on Xuanmin. His gaze seemed oddly vacant, increasingly resembling that of a blind person. "I can feel he's here, I can touch him, but I can't see him. I can see you and the people on the shore. It's not very clear, and I can't make out their faces, but I *can* see them. I can't see Shijiu at all."

Xuanmin glanced at Lu Shijiu, who lay on the river stone, his eyes closed. Then he stared into Lu Nianqi's dark eyes for a moment and said, "You're not seeing through your eyes. Your vision has already faded. You just haven't realized."

"What do you mean?" Lu Nianqi's throat tightened.

Peeking out from under Xuanmin's sleeve, Xue Xian stared at Lu Nianqi's eyes.

"Oh, that makes sense," Xue Xian said. "I was wondering why your eyes lost their light while you were submerged." After a moment's thought, he said to Lu Nianqi, "Lu Shijiu exchanged his life for yours, so his divination skills were also transferred to you. The abnormalities you're feeling must be related. They haven't fully manifested yet, so you'll have to survive a bit of pain."

Lu Nianqi was stunned for a moment. "You mean… You're saying my eyes will become like Shijiu's?"

“Not ‘will.’ They’re mostly there already,” Xue Xian said. “What you’re seeing is no longer the physical form, but qi. You’re seeing what Lu Shijiu did every day.”

“Then the reason I can’t see Shijiu is because…” Lu Nianqi’s nostrils flared, as if he was unable to catch his breath, and when it did come, it was harried and stuttering. He frowned and his eyes grew strained and red. “Because of what?”

Xuanmin raised his hand and pressed his thumb against the acupoint between Lu Nianqi’s brows. “You’ve developed a red mole here. Your brother had one that looked the same. This mark signifies that the life exchange was successful. If his soul still lingered in this world, the mole wouldn’t have emerged.”

Life swapping was a forbidden technique. Even when it succeeded, the survivor of the exchange would usually become abnormal. This was because they’d always inherit something from the one who sacrificed their life—whether appearance, personality, or ability. The lines between the two souls blurred.

The longer the soul of the sacrificed lingered, the stronger their impact would be on the survivor. In other words, in order to minimize the effects on Lu Nianqi, Lu Shijiu hadn’t lingered for even a second. The indifferent words he’d said to Lu Nianqi in the tomb were his genuine, final farewell.

They’d never meet again.

“Don’t cry.” Jiang Shining couldn’t find a handkerchief, so he used his fingers to daub the silent tears rolling from Lu Nianqi’s eyes. “Perhaps…”

Before he could finish, Lu Nianqi had already passed out, his face devoid of color. It might have been from the unbearable agony in his body or from the shock from the news. In any case, Lu Nianqi would be unconscious for quite a long time.

No matter how cold Xuanmin was, or how much of a bastard Xue Xian was, they weren’t about to stroll off and leave behind a dead youth

and an unconscious boy. That would be absolutely asinine. For now, they decided to stay in the small home the boys lived in.

It was a shabby place. There was an area for cooking and a small, drab hall. The latter only had space enough for a square table, with two side wings on either side. Each of those held only a single narrow bed and a wooden cabinet, which must have belonged to the two brothers.

Though they were "staying," in truth the only person who was occupying the place was the unconscious Lu Nianqi. Xuanmin placed him in one of the rooms, then went to the nearby funeral parlor to order a coffin. After he laid Lu Shijiu in the coffin, Xuanmin put it in the other room.

Just as Xuanmin sat down in the hall, planning to carefully think over the stone lock and iron tags, Xue Xian's head poked out from his sleeve. "Don't sit down yet. Go find a tailor. A fabric store will do."

Xuanmin looked down at him, waiting for his explanation.

Xue Xian scratched at his own head with a claw. Then, with the most authoritative tone he could muster, he said, "I'm not wearing any clothes."

Xuanmin's eyes roved over the small dragon's body. A second later, he coolly tossed Xue Xian's previous words back at him: "Which book taught you it was okay to coil naked around someone's wrist?"

Xue Xian bit Xuanmin again.

His dragon's teeth were razor-sharp, and each bite left a crescent-shaped mark. Xuanmin's expression remained neutral as he brushed aside his sleeve, revealing his slender, bony fingers. He curled his index and middle fingers and presented them to Xue Xian. On those fingers were at least six bite marks, all thanks to this creature.

Xue Xian turned his head away, pretending not to understand. "Stop showing off your hands. They're no better than chicken feet—way too bony. Practically useless decorations. Coiling around them feels uncomfortable as hell. Please, just start moving and get me some clothes."

Jiang Shining entered the room in time to hear Xue Xian's tantrum. Unable to bear watching, he immediately retreated into a sunless corner of the kitchen.

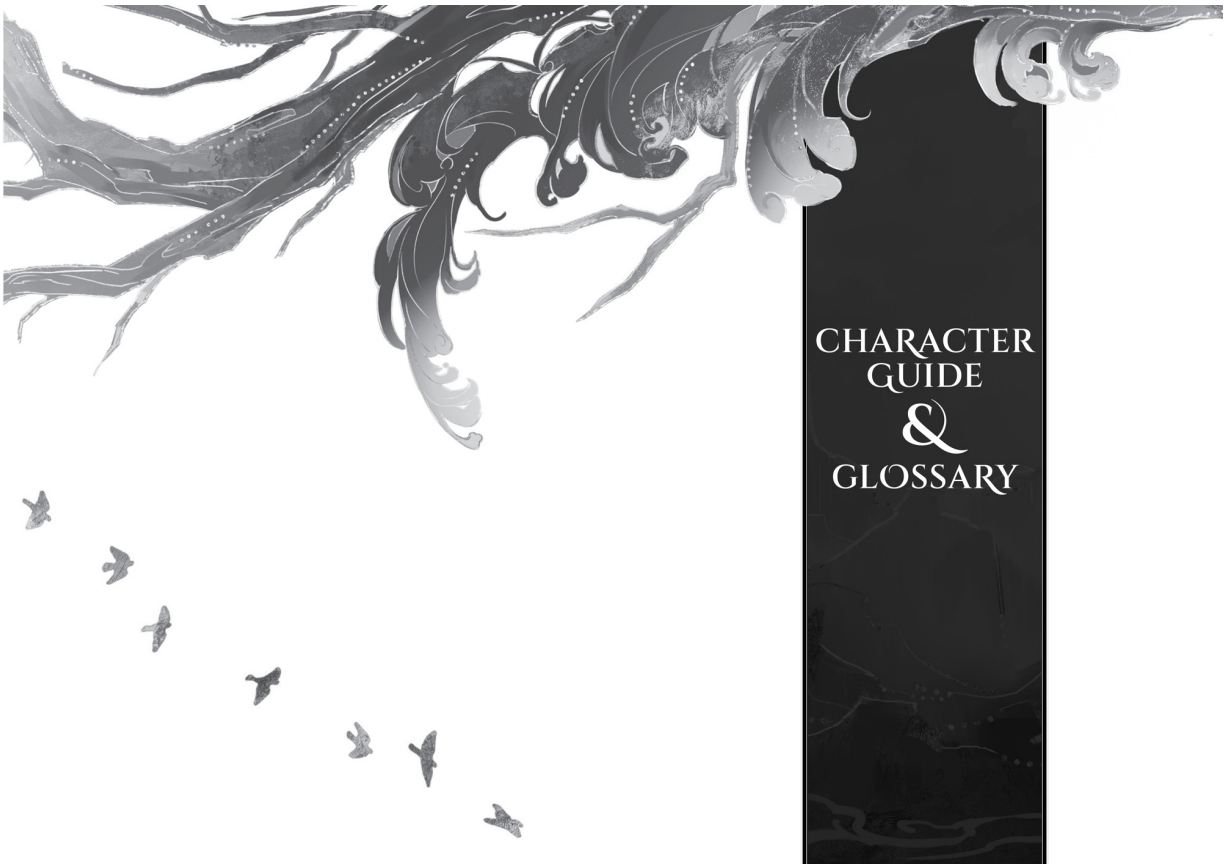
Xuanmin shook his head and stood to leave.

In the beginning, his trip was just to buy Xue Xian some clothes, but what would happen while he was out would prove more complicated, and lead to quite a few unforeseen developments.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Copper Coins

VOLUME 2



CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

XUE XIAN 薛闲 (“IDLE”): A dragon that was left partially paralyzed after being maimed.

XUANMIN 玄悯 (“PROFOUND COMPASSION”): A wandering monk with a mysterious past.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

NINGYANG COUNTY

JIANG SHINING 江世宁: A scholarly ghost who perished three years ago in a fire.

LIU XUE 刘诩: The scribe of Ningyang County, also called Scribe Liu.

LIU CHONG 刘冲: Liu Xue’s mentally disabled eldest son.

LIU JIN 刘进: Liu Xue’s second son.

OLD LADY LIU 刘老太太: Liu Xue’s deceased mother.

WOLONG COUNTY

LU NIANQI 陆廿七: A young boy looking for his older brother.

LU SHIJIU 陆十九: A blind fortune teller and Lu Nianqi’s missing older brother.

LU YUAN 陆垣: The Lu siblings’ deceased father.

OLD MAN LIU 刘老头: The old boatman who vanished with Lu Shijiu.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger," which can be added before names or titles for juniors like "xiaodi." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGZI: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

SHIFU: A respectful address usually meant for one's master, but can be used for Buddhist monks as well.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and

more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *Copper Coins.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Xuē Xián

X as in **sh**y, uē as in **ya**y

X as in **sh**y, ián as in **yawn**

Xuánmĭn

Xu as in **shoo**t, án as in Canadi**an**

Mĭn as in **mean**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

DHARMA NAME: A new name given to monks during a Buddhist initiation ritual. It serves as a symbol of severing any ties to the physical world.

DIVINATION: Chinese fortune-telling covers a wide variety of techniques and methods. Generally, diviners use their understanding of qi, the five elements, yin and yang, and astronomy to calculate and make observations.

The art of geomancy or feng shui involves the diviner calculating and manipulating the qi flowing through the area through different layouts and orientations. The balanced and harmonious flow of energy within a location is believed to impart powerful benefits.

With physiognomy and palmistry, a diviner reads a person's fate and state of health through their facial features, complexion, body, palms, or bones.

EXORCISM: Both Daoist priests and Buddhist monks could be tasked to remove spirits from a location, but their methodologies differ. In contrast to Western and Daoist exorcism techniques, which focus on forcefully or even violently expelling the spirit, Buddhist monks sought to help the spirit move peacefully to the afterlife, known as "transcendence." Even now, Chinese funerals will hire the services of monks, who perform rituals to guide the deceased's spirit onward.

QIMEN DUNJIA: An ancient form of Chinese divination, rooted in Daoism and calculated over a 3×3 cosmic board of squares that correspond to the nine palaces. The Eight Gates—Initiation, Life, Death, Obstruction, Repose, Scenery, Injury, and Fright—move around the eight outer squares depending on the divination results.

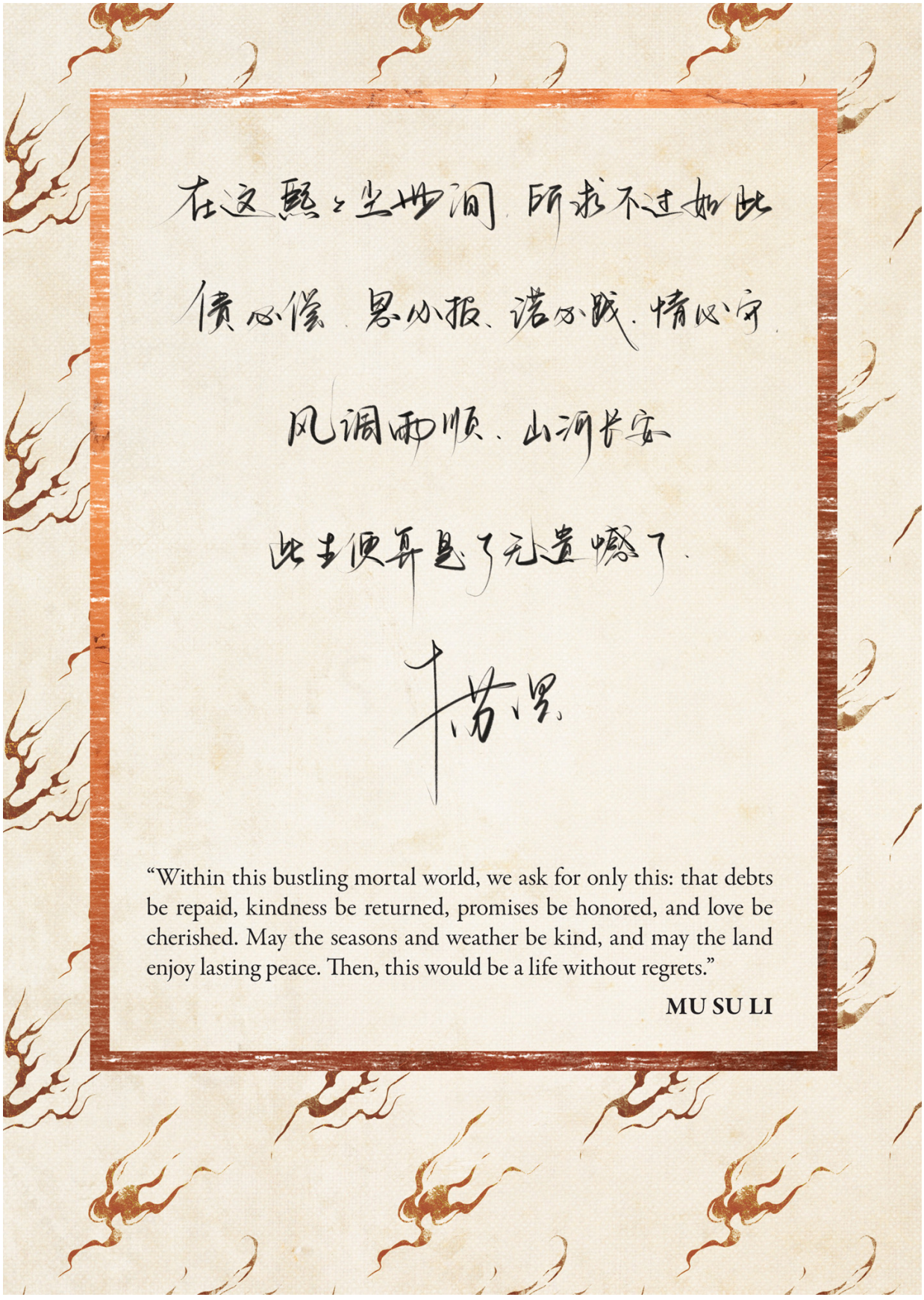
TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians, similar to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties, such as lotus tea.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

About the Author

Mu Su Li is a signed author on Jinjiang Literature City. A writer of the post-90s generation known for her wild imagination and whimsical style, she loves fantasy and believes words can hold warmth. She hopes that every story she writes brings comfort and joy to her readers. Her signature works include *A Certain Someone*, *Panguan*, *Global Examination*, *Three Hundred Years of Longing*, and more.



"Within this bustling mortal world, we ask for only this: that debts be repaid, kindness be returned, promises be honored, and love be cherished. May the seasons and weather be kind, and may the land enjoy lasting peace. Then, this would be a life without regrets."

MU SU LI

A MONK, A GHOST, AND A DRAGON WALK INTO A MANOR...

Under the pale glow of dawn, Xue Xian—once a mighty dragon, now a handmade paper effigy—is moments away from being exorcised. The worst part? He doesn't see it coming. Spellbound into his form alongside the ever-irritating Jiang Shining—a restless ghost caught up in the dragon's misfortunes—the two must navigate a perilous path to settle long-standing scores.

Enter Xuanmin, an enigmatic monk drawn to the ruins of Jiang Manor by the lingering traces of a sinister curse. Finding two crude paper figures he surmises to be evil spirits, he tosses them into his pouch, taking the dragon and ghost along for the ride. Furious at his new predicament, Xue Xian swears revenge: If he must suffer this journey, he'll make sure the aloof monk suffers right alongside him.

Thus begins an unusual pilgrimage, where three unlikely companions—an exiled dragon, a restless ghost, and a monk without a past—must unravel the tangled mysteries of their fates.

SET IN ANCIENT CHINA, A RAGTAG TRIO SEEKS TO RECLAIM THEIR FORMER GLORY IN THIS ROLLICKING DANMEI ADVENTURE!

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Footnotes

Chapter 2: Paper Doll

[1] “Teacher” or “master.” For one’s master in one’s own school. Gender-neutral. Can also be used to respectfully address a Buddhist monk.

Chapter 3: The Scribe’s Residence

[2] Usually a character meaning “child.” When added to a name as a suffix, it expresses affection.

Chapter 5: Ghostfence

[3] An ancient form of Chinese divination, rooted in Daoism and calculated over a 3×3 cosmic board of squares that correspond to the nine ways that individuals seek satisfaction. The Eight Gates move around the eight outer squares.

Chapter 7: Empty Millstone

[4] A respectful address for young men that means “young master.” The da- prefix denotes that Liu Chong is the eldest son.

Chapter 12: Island Tomb

[5] A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

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